



Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues

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Introduction

It is now widely accepted that children should be actively involved in any research project that seeks to understand and respond appropriately to children's unique perspectives and experiences. The challenge that lies ahead for those researchers committed to hearing children's voices, is how to do this in a way that is both effective and ethical.

Fortunately, over the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in finding better ways to facilitate children's voices in all aspects of the research process. This has resulted in a wealth of information for potential researchers to draw on when engaging in research with children.

Inherent to this growing commitment of involving children in research has been the willingness of researchers to critically reflect on their chosen methodologies and share their experiences of what has, and hasn't, worked. Such commitment to critical thinking and reflexive practice enables innovative and flexible research models to evolve and this has been particularly helpful in trying to piece together a best practice framework from which our own study of 'children's experiences of homelessness' can be based.

Although many Australian studies were uncovered in this literature review, the UK proved to be the greatest source of best practice models for engaging children in social research. The vast amount of literature being published in the UK is most probably due to the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Children 5-16 Research Programme'. This programme was a major effort to throw light on contemporary childhood in the UK. Lasting for over five years (1995–2001), it comprised 22 linked research projects, each looking at a different aspect of children's social lives, living conditions, experiences and perspectives (see Prout, 2002).

Although the ages of the child research subjects in the literature did vary, most studies provided examples of research conducted with children aged 7-16 years of age. This may have been influenced by the amount of publications stemming from the 'Children 5-16 Research Programme'.

However, it is important to acknowledge that some studies demonstrated the possibility of successfully engaging preschool aged children in projects seeking to gain insights into their thoughts, ideas and experiences of the world (see Kendrick, 1986 cited in Alderson, 2003; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; MacNaughton, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2004 cited in Fraser, 2004; Corsaro, 2005).

One of the most encouraging aspects of this literature review was the diversity of topics successfully investigated with the active participation of children. This included research on sensitive issues such as:

- Out-of-home care and child protection systems (Johnson, Yoken & Voss, 1995; West, 1996; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998; Daly, Moss & Reay, 2003; Mason, Urquhart & Bolzan, 2003; O'Neill, 2004; Aubrey & Dahl, 2006;)
- Homelessness (Young & Barrett, 2001; Edwards, 2003; Jurak, 2003)
- Crime (Pain et al, 2002)
- Perceptions of problems and coping strategies (Punch 2002a)
- Illness and pain (Horner, 2000; Kourtesluoma, Hentinen & Nikkonen, 2003)
- Poverty (Ridge, 2003)
- Wellbeing (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996)
- Young caring (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke & Craig, 1996)
- Respite services for children with a disability (Save the Children, 2001)
- How children negotiate independence in rural Bolivia (Punch, 2002b)
- Violence against children (Laws & Mann, 2004; Beazley et al 2005)
- Children and risk (Harden et al, 2000).

New ideologies of childhood

Much of the literature emphasised that the way we think about childhood inherently shapes the research in which we engage (Harden et al, 2000:1 & Thomas & O’Kane, 2000:824).

Over the last two decades there have been two major international shifts that have influenced the way we conceive childhood and view children’s place in society. These changes in the ideologies of childhood appear to have dramatically increased both the motivation, and confidence, of researchers to actively engage children in their research projects.

Perhaps the more prominent and pervasive of these changes has been the children’s rights movement. This movement was given extra credibility and momentum by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia ratified in January 1991 (<http://www.unhchr.ch/pdf/report.pdf> accessed 26 March 2006).

“Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to say what they think about anything that affects them, and that what they say must be listened to and given due consideration” (Save the Children, 2001:12).

This has prompted some governments, organisations and service systems involved in children’s lives to seek children’s ideas on issues that are directly affecting their lives and to find ways of enabling their active participation in decision making processes.

The second notable shift that has had a profound impact on the way researchers are approaching research with children, has been the change in how childhood is being conceptualised, stemming from the constructivist approach in developmental psychology and what is sometimes referred to as the **‘new sociology of childhood’**.

This new approach rejects the traditional framing of children as ‘adults in waiting’ and emphasises children as a diverse group of active social actors who are valuable contributors to society and competent of voicing their experiences (see Corsaro, 2005).

This emphasis on the competence of children, understood in relation to experience, rather than age (Mason & Urquhart, 2001:19) replaces the popular ideologies of childhood which have tended to emphasise children’s lack of knowledge (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988:72).

Hence moving “away from the narrow focus of socialisation and child development (the study of what children become) to a sociology which attempts to take children seriously as they experience their lives in the here and now as children” (Morrow and Richards, 1996:92).

Taking children’s experiences seriously and recognising that they have their own distinctive abilities to understand and explain their world, has had huge ramifications for the way we engage them in research activities.

Children are now recognised as being able to fully participate in all aspects of the research process. In fact, to use a term that has been coined by some, it could be said to have changed the research culture from one that does ‘research *on* or *about* children to one that does research *with* or *by* children’.

Ethical considerations

“In any research involving people, the protection of the rights and welfare of the individual participants is of primary important (National Health and Medical Research Council 2002 cited in Howard, Hoyer et al, 2002:19).

However, ethical considerations seem to be given even more importance when embarking on research with children. As such, a large amount of the literature

focused on the ethics of conducting research with children. In particular, special consideration was given to the following issues:

- Protection
- Informed consent
- Privacy
- Confidentiality
- Addressing power imbalances
- Importance of reflexivity.

The decisions that most researchers made in regard to these ethical issues drew on key theoretical assumptions derived from the sociology of childhood, which emphasise the importance of respecting children and their diverse competencies. This sometimes necessitated challenging some of the more traditional research practices which Alderson claims have often been applied to exclude children and young people from research (Alderson, 2000 cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:14).

Protection

“The duty to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of those you study and work with is central to the researcher’s role. It is essential to assess the risks to individuals and groups which might be entailed in participating in your research, and to weigh these up against the benefits you hope to achieve” (Laws & Mann, 2004:29-30).

Therefore, before the research progresses to the recruitment phase, an in depth evaluation needs to take place into the appropriateness of including child subjects in research projects. Traditionally researchers have tended to err on the side of caution in this debate, operating within a ‘principle of care’ in order to protect and nurture children.

Morrow and Richards (1996) explain that this is reflective of the wider ethical debates around children which centre on the extent to which children are perceived as being vulnerable on the one hand, and as incompetent on the other. It has also been identified as being consistent with an ‘adultist’ version of childhood which “assumes that adults know best, that they make decisions over and for children and that children accept these decisions” (Danby & Farrell, 2004:42).

Researchers, themselves, are now recognising that perhaps they do not ‘know best’ and have been too quick to ‘protect’ children from the invasive rigours of social research processes. For example, O’Neill openly stated that her research into children’s experiences of care “was probably too cautious in its avoidance of more contact with them [children]...As a result, the second 3-year phase of this research, which is underway, wholeheartedly involves the children and young people in discussions about their own lives” (O’Neill, 2004:217).

Mahon and colleagues (1996:146) conferred that, “it is neither theoretically nor methodologically appropriate to rely on proxies to represent the views and experiences of children. On the contrary, children’s views can and ought to be taken seriously”.

Therefore, individual children should be afforded the opportunity to assess for themselves the potential risks and benefits of their involvement in any research projects. This emphasises why *informed* consent is so important (discussed below).

Once involved in the project, children need a safe and secure environment in which to discuss sensitive issues. This can be done by providing *privacy*, *confidentiality* and *reducing the power imbalances* that exist in the researcher-participant relationship (all of these issues are discussed further below).

At the completion of the research process, good practice involves debriefing the child participants after the research process is completed (National Children’s

Bureau, 2003), helping them to identify the support networks available to them (Beazley, 2005) and ensuring that further support is available if and where necessary (Mahon et al, 1996).

Further support may mean the referral to appropriate services (Laws & Mann, 2004:30). However, these services must have the capacity to meet the needs of the participants in a timely and appropriate manner. Therefore, researchers may be required to develop partnerships or memorandums of understanding with local support services at the commencement of the project.

Informed consent

As a consequence of the traditional protectionist approach mentioned above, Harden and colleagues echoed the experience of many when they stated that, “Informed consent is problematic not primarily because of children’s lack of understanding of the research, but because their participation in any research project is dependent on adult gatekeepers” (Harden et al, 2000:2.24).

Laws and Mann (2004:33) state that “it will be necessary to seek the consent of parents and carers to work with individual children”. However, the literature demonstrated that this process can be negotiated in a way that respects children’s competencies and empowers them to make choices for themselves.

For example, Mahon and others (1996:150) stated that in their study “children were approached directly for their consent, with parents first being asked only for permission to make contact with the child”. Thomas and O’Kane (1998) in their study of 8-12 year olds in the care and protection system, empowered the child participants by seeking active agreement from the child and passive agreement from the parent.

Milne, Munford and Saunders (2001:5) explain that such approaches can have added benefits to the research project; “in one recent study which involved young males aged between 13 and 15 years, we achieved a far higher recruitment rate

when we approached them directly in the first instance than when we followed the more traditional method of first seeking their parent's consent and asking that they approach their sons regarding participation”.

All of these methods highlight the fact that children should be supported to make their own decision about when and how they will be involved in research projects. “This may require that information is adapted and presented in different ways for individual participants depending on their competencies and circumstances (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:18).

Adapting the way information is presented to participants can also help to overcome some of the widely held beliefs that children are not capable of deciding for themselves whether or not to be involved in research projects. These beliefs are based on the premise that “children have a limited understanding of what it means to be involved in research, and second, they are socialised to do what adults tell them” (Beresford 1997 cited in Save the Children, 2001:11).

In an effort to address these assumptions and the inherent power imbalances that exist in the adult researcher – child participant relationship, many researchers sent out ‘information packs’ for children inviting them to participate in the research (see Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Save the Children, 2001; Danby & Farrell, 2004; O’Neill, 2004). In some cases these included an audio cassette (Thomas and O’Kane 1998; O’Neill, 2004) or photos of the researchers (Save the Children, 2001).

These techniques worked particularly well and Danby and Farrell (2004:39) noted that “many of the children described this experience of providing consent as a new experience in their lives, as well as a positive experience”.

Most importantly, the literature emphasised that the notion of informed consent does not end with an agreement given at the commencement of the research project - it should be seen as a continual process. It is vital that children know and

are reminded of the fact that they can withdraw from the research at any time (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998; Save the Children, 2001; Laws & Mann, 2004; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005).

Privacy

Once informed consent has been obtained, often the next difficulty that the researcher faces is negotiating privacy for the children (Alderson 1994 cited in Mauthner, 1997:18).

Negotiating to interview children on their own, or without the presence of their parent/guardian can be a delicate, but important matter, which can affect or bring into question the data quality of the research. Researchers need to be aware that, “different results can emerge when interviewing teenagers alone or with their parents (Brannen, 1994). Alone, young people can disclose matters which they do not usually reveal in the family...[and]...it can be even harder for researchers to obtain very young children’s views...in the home context” (Mauthner, 1997:19).

This highlights that, wherever possible, children should be afforded the same right to privacy as would be done with adult research subjects. Some children, however, may not feel comfortable being left alone with an unfamiliar interviewer (Masson, 2004:56). Therefore, it should be up to the children themselves to make a final decision on whether they feel comfortable to be interviewed alone or would prefer to have someone else present, or to participate in group sessions (Laws & Mann, 2004:30).

The task of the researcher then, is to gain the support and trust of children and their gatekeepers, by providing them with appropriate choices for participation and by explaining:

- the reasons why privacy is sought; and
- the theoretical premise from which the research is being based (i.e. one of recognising and respecting children’s competence and that will endeavour

to provide children with a position of power in the whole research process).

Confidentiality

As well as addressing privacy issues with parents, Save the Children (2001:39) stated it was essential to “ensure that parents also understand the importance of preserving their child’s right to confidentiality – particularly if they are present during the sessions”.

Traditionally in any research situation, or in most formal interactions with children, it has been assumed that confidentiality can never be fully guaranteed to children. Laws and Mann (2004:37) state that “confidentiality is an important value, but it does not over-ride the duty to protect the welfare of respondents”.

Therefore, the notion of ‘limited confidentiality’ has been commonly applied when working with children. Whatever notion of ‘limited confidentiality’ is being applied, best practice guidelines require that before the research interaction commences, children should be fully aware of how information will be gathered, recorded and reported on and what information will, and won’t, be kept confidential.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005:22) state that when conducting research with children “confidentiality should be breached when:

- A child or young person appears to be in a situation in which they could be seriously harmed
- A child or young person discloses, either directly or indirectly, physical, sexual or psychological abuse or neglect
- The researcher becomes aware of something they believe requires reporting to someone who will be able to appropriately assess the situation, such as medical condition or learning disability. In this case researchers should make sure that appropriate follow-up occurs”.

However, this literature review uncovered that some researchers are beginning to challenge such strict and limiting notions of ‘confidentiality’. For example:

- In Mahon and colleagues’ 1996 study of young carers, “it was decided provisionally to guarantee total confidentiality to all the children and young people involved...a pragmatic decision was taken to renegotiate guarantees of confidentiality, should the responses given by the child begin to raise concern” (Mahon et al, 1996:151).
- Thomas and O’Kane’s (1998) research with 8-12yolds in the care and protection system tried to ensure confidentiality as much as possible in anything the children disclosed. They stated that “any disclosure of information to us during the research would be an indication that the child was ready to pass on the information to someone they trusted” and the child was then supported to do so.
- Punch’s study with 13-14yr olds decided that “the one exception to confidentiality would be if the young person disclosed that their ‘life was in danger’. In the case of less extreme disclosures, discussions between myself as the researcher and the young person would take the form of encouragement for help to be sought” (Punch, 2002a:47).

Central to all of these examples is the notion of enabling the child to maintain as much power and control over their situation as possible.

Addressing power imbalances

Much has been written about the power imbalances that exist within the adult researcher – child participant relationship and the need to try and redress this.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005:31) warn that if this power differential goes unquestioned, this can lead children to respond with what they think researchers want to hear, particularly in one-to-one interviews.

Therefore, to not only meet ethical obligations, but to improve the validity and reliability of the research data, “A consensus has developed around the belief that the ethics, tools and roles employed in qualitative children’s research should empower children” (Davis, 1998:329).

O’Kane (2000, cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:10) asserts that the first step in overcoming this power differential is openly acknowledging that it exists. This in itself can help to foster equal relations between researchers and participants. Overwhelmingly though, the most common remedies found to address power imbalances were to include children from the outset of research projects and to give them as much control over the content and process of the research as practically possible.

A recurrent theme in the literature was that through *reflexivity*, responsiveness and using methods which allow children to set their own agendas it is possible to equalise power imbalances (Mauthner, 1997:19). This was seen to be best done through the use of non-confrontational participatory techniques chosen by the participants themselves (Morrow and Richards (1996:100).

One specific strategy adopted by many researchers was to put children in charge of tape recorders being used to record interview sessions. Thomas and O’Kane stated that “most children, unlike some adult interviewees, were happy to be taped; we usually put them in charge of the apparatus so that they could switch off whenever they wanted” (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998:339). This technique was found to not only help to diminish power differentials in the interview, but also to aid the willingness of children to be taped and the establishment of rapport between researcher and respondent (Mahon et al, 1996:152).

Importance of reflexivity

Although, it is not, and should not be defined exclusively as being an ethical issue, the need for critically reflexive research practice has been emphasised throughout the literature as being paramount to ethical and effective research with children.

Mason and Urquhart (2001) contend that the skills required for research to be conducted that respects and represents the 'new sociology of childhood' are based on reflexivity.

“Reflexivity in this context has been defined as opening ‘the way to a more radical consciousness of self’ and ‘a mode of self-analysis and political awareness’ (Calloway, 1992 cited in Mason & Urquhart, 2001:19). It “is achieved through detachment, internal dialogue and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of the process through which researchers construct and question their interpretations of field experiences” (Hertz, 1997 cited in Davis et al, 2003:201-202).

In other words, it requires researchers to ‘step back’ from their own adult perspective, views and usual modes of practice to constantly question their role, assumptions, choice of methods and application of these methods throughout the whole research process (Davis, 1998 & Punch, 2002b).

Flexibility and openness to new ideas and ways of operating is crucial to reflexive practice. When gathering data researchers need to be able to make careful observations and assessments on what is and isn't working and be prepared to adapt their techniques according to how well children are being engaged and whether or not key research questions are being answered (Pain et al, 2002:24).

Reflexivity is also critical when interpreting data. Fine and Sandstrom (1988:34) state that “It is wrong to assume that our social meanings are the same as the social meanings of children”. Therefore we have to be aware of our own biases and that we may be interpreting children's behaviours or views through old frames

of reference that may be formed by our own memories of childhood. Journal writing and regular meetings with other members of the research team can be useful in helping researchers to address these issues.

Conclusion

The variety of approaches taken by different researchers implies that there are no consistent or 'hard and fast rules' on any of the ethical issues discussed above. Decisions will be influenced by the context of the particular study taking place, the care and protection laws under which the researcher may have to abide by and the views and opinions of all the research stakeholders and participants.

However, the literature does emphasise that it is crucial that any decisions taken by researcher need to be continually reflected on and informed by theoretical assumptions of childhood that promote children's rights, respect diversity and recognise the unique contribution that children can make to research processes and outcomes.



A child-centred and participatory approach to research

Just as there are no 'hard and fast rules' governing ethical considerations, the literature demonstrated that there are a wide range of approaches and methodologies that can be used to successfully engage children in research projects.

However, most, if not all, of the researchers in this literature review demonstrated a strong commitment to children's rights and the principles underpinning the 'new sociology of childhood'. This resulted in the researchers choosing methodologies consistent with a **child-centred participatory research framework**.

Central to the notion of being child-focused and participatory is the need to include children in as many aspects of the research process as possible, including design, data collection, analysis and reporting.

Research design

During the design phase of a research project decisions are made about key questions to be researched and the methods that will be used to answer them. Involving children in the research design phase is important because children's priorities may differ from our own (Mandla, 2003). Hence, children are likely to have their own concerns or questions about the research topic, which may be as important to ask as those brought by the researcher (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998:341).

Daly, Moss and Reay (2003:14) were able to identify a number of reasons why it is useful to involve children and young people in the design of the research, including that it:

- Develops rapport
- Ensures participation in how the project unfolds

- Maximises a sense of ownership from the beginning
- Develops an awareness of the child or young person's perception and understanding of the question
- Confirms or otherwise the relevance or importance of the question to children and young people. Do they think it's a good idea?
- Establishes what they think is the best way to go about it and explores how they would do it
- Develops the research facilitators thinking around the question, tools and methodology.

Some authors suggested that participant involvement in the design phase is best facilitated by running full or half-day workshops (see Thomas & O'Kane, 1998; Mason & Urquhart, 2001; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:36). These workshops would be exploratory sessions that addressed issues such as what key questions should be asked in the research and how data should be gathered.

Inclusion of significant others

Such workshops may also include other people who play significant roles in children's everyday lives. Many researchers mentioned that garnering the support of, and actively including, significant others, is implicit to the success of participatory research projects (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Daly et al, 2003). O'Kane (2003:153-154) explains that this is vital, because it is only through the process of gaining active support from caretakers that children are given more space and autonomy to make choices about their participation in the research.

Including significant others when researching children also recognises the fact that "there is no free and autonomous realm of childhood outside the social relations in which childhood in general, and particular individual childhoods are forged (Scott et al, 1998 cited in Harden et al, 2000:1.3). Therefore children's experiences of their everyday lives are heavily influenced by significant others such as parents,

carers, other legal guardians, teachers, community workers and child protection workers.

In accordance with this, some researchers contend that to fully appreciate and understand children's experiences, interviews should also be conducted with parents or the other significant people within their lives. Many examples of this method of triangulation were found in the literature review (for examples see: Reich & Earls 1990 cited in Scott 2003; Mahon et al,1996; Save the Children, 2001; Punch, 2002b; Mason, Urquhat & Bolzan, 2003; O'Neill, 2004).

It is important that this application of triangulation is not used to 'check-up' on children's stories. Rather, O'Neill stresses that the importance of a multi-voice research design is that it allows different meanings of the same events to be heard (O'Neill, 2004:317).

This can be especially important in the formulation of recommendations from the research findings. As White explains, youth and community workers in particular "are often able to see 'the forest' as well as the 'trees' when it comes to broad trends. They not only provide stories of personal problems, but are able to see the links between the difficulties experienced by a range of different young people" (White, 1996:20).

Research setting

Once a commitment to true participation has been initiated and momentum for the project has been established, it is important to ensure that participants remain in a position of power for the rest of the research process. The setting in which the research is being carried out is crucial in establishing a perception of power equalisation before the collection of data has begun.

Children behave and interact with adults differently in different settings. Thus where the interviews are carried out is quite likely to influence the way children

respond (Scott, 2003:103). For example, children may be used to their relative powerlessness and the formality required in a school setting (Robinson & Kellett, 2004:91). Therefore interviewing children in a school building may not be appropriate.

As such, Mahon and colleagues' (1996:152) state that "it is frequently desirable to interview people in their own homes and this often provides important observational data for the researcher". Interviewing children in their own setting can also make children feel more comfortable (Punch, 2002b:328).

However, it is important to remember that some children may not feel comfortable talking about sensitive family issues in their own home and it may prove to be disruptive to children being able to tell their own story. In their research with children with disabilities, Save the Children (2001) found that children could often be interrupted by siblings or parents at home and privacy was often a lot harder to negotiate in a home setting.

Therefore, "the implications of the research setting need to be considered with particular care, awareness and sensitivity in research with children" (Punch, 2002b:328) and "interviews should be conducted in a setting where the child feels comfortable, both physically and emotionally" (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:57).

This all leads to the logical conclusion that children should be consulted about the research setting and if possible research should be conducted in a setting of the child's choosing.

Data collection

Just as it is important to provide choices about where information is being gathered, it is also crucial to provide participants with choices in how it will be collected.

The literature review highlighted that “there are a range of participatory research approaches and techniques, which offer great benefits in engaging young people and involving them in solutions to the problems they experience” (Pain et al, 2002:21) and children should be able to choose between a broad range of these techniques (Punch, 2002b). An exhaustive list of participatory methods and techniques discovered in the literature review are discussed in detail later in this report (see pages 15-31).

It has also been highlighted that to fully engage children in the research, the process of data collection should consist of more than a ‘one-off encounter’ with children. Most of the researchers found that it was helpful to conduct a series of interviews or focus groups with participants, especially when dealing with sensitive issues. This assisted with things such as; developing rapport and trust, providing opportunities to follow-up on issues and further explore or confirm participants’ ideas and thoughts (see Edwards 1998; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998; Mason & Urquhart, 2001; Save the Children, 2001; Punch, 2002b; Jurak, 2003).

Milne, Munford and Saunders (2001:5) reiterate that one lesson they have learnt is that, “good research information comes out of carefully constructed relationships...A one-shot interview is unlikely to yield much useful data. However, once a trusting relationship has been established, high quality data can be generated in large volumes”.

Another method which ensures full participation in the collection or generation of data is to employ children as research assistants or engage them as peer researchers. In peer research children, usually girls and boys who themselves have some experience of the issue under investigation, are engaged as researchers to work alongside adults” (Laws & Mann, 2004:58). This method is now particularly prominent in youth research, but some research was uncovered that had employed the use of much younger child interviewers (Miller, 1997 and Howarth, 1997 cited in Alderson, 2003; Hect, 1998 cited in Corsaro, 2005:56; Participation and

Education Group Project, 1998 cited in Robinson & Kellett, 2004; Jones, Jeyasingham & Rajasooriya, 2002 cited in Jones, 2004).

However, this approach, like the others mentioned above, is dependent upon the project's time, funding and resource constraints. Peer researchers need to be fully trained and properly supported (Laws & Mann, 2004). Harden (2000:2.19) also comments that “involving children in interviewing may create as many problems as it solves, not because the interviewers are children, but because of their relationship to the researchers who are making use of their services”. Therefore, it is an approach that requires careful planning and consideration and as such will only be an appropriate strategy for a select amount of research projects.

Analysis and reporting

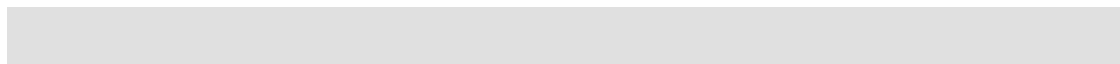
Active participation should not end with the collection of data. Children's involvement in the analysis and reporting of the data generated is also important. Punch reminds us that “ Particular care must be taken when interpreting children's views” (Punch, 2002b:329) and Howard and colleagues (2002b:12) state that “systems of checks and balances must be employed to aid triangulation of data and make the filters through which young people's ‘voices’ are presented visible”. There are a number of ways of doing this.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005:31) suggest having workshops with representatives of the participant group at the data analysis stage to gather their ideas about the research findings. An added bonus of this technique is that it can also be good closure for participants from the project.

Other techniques employed by various researchers included getting children to check their interview transcripts for accuracy, meaning and emphasis (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:51) and enabling some of the children to choose which children's comments and quotes were to be included in reports (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998:345).

“Children and teenagers also tend to be deeply concerned from the start with the follow up stages of publicity and using research findings to change the world” (Alderson, 2003:246). One way of including children in this process is to allow children to make decisions about the dissemination of the research report (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998:341) and to be included in the dissemination by being supported to present research findings at conferences (Alderson, 2003:247).

Therefore, by adhering to the principles and practices of active inclusion throughout the whole process of the research project, child-centred participatory research becomes more than simply the mechanical application of a ‘technique’ or ‘method’, but instead a process of including children in dialogue, action, analysis and change (Pretty, 1995:54).



Research methods

Despite the reassurances that come from the principles underpinning the ‘new sociology of childhood’ and the wealth of literature that now exists on how to effectively engage children in participatory social research, the prospect of actually gathering data from children can seem daunting to even the most experienced of researchers. As one such researcher explained:

“At the start of the project I experienced greater concerns about the process of data collection, and self-doubt about my own research skills, than I have ever felt before...Interviews, as far as I was concerned were about talk. How do you get children to talk?...What if they don’t say anything? What if they just walk off when I’m talking? What if they can’t understand what I ask them or I can’t understand their replies? These were just some of my ‘what if’ nightmare scenarios”
(Harden et al, 2000:3.3 - 3.8).

It is worthwhile noting that Harden went on to have a very positive research experience with the children involved in her study by combining traditional research methods with task-centred activities; an approach used by most of the researchers in this literature review.

The literature was consistent in concluding that a multi-modal approach is optimum for engaging children in research on sensitive issues. This may include utilising a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews (to gain personal stories/experiences) and focus groups / activity days (to build on individual narratives and discuss broader issues/ideas).

A number of researchers used both interviews and focus groups with the same participants, with good success (see Hill et al,1996; Thomas & O’Kane,1998; Pain et al, 2002; Punch 2002a; Swords, 2002; Aubrey & Dahl, 2006). There was some variation in the choice of which order to use these methods and instead of a

combination of the two, some researchers offered participants the choice of being involved in either an interview or a focus group. Offering this option was felt to be particularly helpful when the ages of the child participants varied, as some older children do not want to talk about sensitive issues in front of younger children (Edwards, 2003:8).

Whatever particular structure is chosen for the collection of data, the literature placed the most emphasis on using creative and innovative techniques, such as visual and task-based activities, to prompt discussion and debate within the interview or focus group setting. In many instances, it was suggested that researchers should develop a 'tool-kit' of different activities to be used within individual interviews and focus group sessions.

The remainder of this report will be dedicated to an examination of these different techniques, (starting with the traditional methods of participant observation, interviews and focus groups) including a discussion of how and when they are best used with children.

Some of these techniques will be more appropriate for use than others in our own project and choices about which ones are chosen will depend on a number of factors including: the project's funding agreements, available resources and time (Kirby & Bryson, 2002), the research aims and key questions and of course the needs and preferences of the research participants themselves.

In terms of the needs and preferences of participants, Swords (2002:15) explains "it is important that the research methods selected are...sensitive to the age of the respondents, their development and other needs". However, it is important to not become preoccupied with considerations around the age of participants as there are "... many factors other than age which are central to research strategies and outcomes, including other forms of social differentiation [such as gender and cultural differences], the situational contexts of interviews, and the subject being explored" (Harden et al, 2000:6.1).

Participant observation

Participant observation is “research that involves social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984 cited in Fine & Sandstrom, 1988:12). “It includes watching, listening, reflecting and also engaging with the children in conversation, as appropriate to naturally occurring events and to the researcher’s understandings during the process of fieldwork” (Mayall, 2003:121).

Some have argued that participant observation enables children to feel more comfortable because they are in their own spaces (Punch, 2002b) and that it can provide a truer account of children’s lives than interviews because the researcher can establish a relationship with the child and so gain a fuller picture of ‘what they really think’ (Ennew, 1994 cited in Harden et al, 2000:5.2).

It has also been suggested that it is the most appropriate method for collecting data from young children (aged five to six) (Mauthner, 1997:22 citing Connolly) and it is also one way of effectively researching preschool children (see Mandell, 1984, 1986 & 1988, Sluckin, 1981 & Corsaro, 1985 all cited in Fine and Sandstrom, 1988).

However, studies based solely on participant observation usually involve prolonged fieldwork in which the researcher gains access to a group and carries out intensive observation over a period of months or years (Corsaro, 2005:51).

Therefore, in research projects with limited timeframes, it may be useful to combine participatory observation with other techniques such as play or task-based activities, particularly when working with very young children, so that a greater understanding can be sought in regard to the influences on children’s

behaviour and their interactions and experiences as they are unfolding in their present lives.

Interviews

“At the heart of all good participatory research and development lies sensitive interviewing. Without it, no matter what other methods you use, the discussion will yield poor information and limited understanding” (Pretty et al, 1995:73).

Although one-on-one interviews are probably the setting in which most researchers are experienced and feel the most at ease, there are some components of traditional interviewing that may require adaptation or special consideration when interviewing children about sensitive issues. The issues highlighted in the literature as being necessary for conducting successful interviews with children included:

- Choosing an appropriate setting (discussed on page 12);
- The importance of building rapport;
- Having an unstructured or semi-structured interview format;
- Enabling children to provide a free narrative account of their lived experiences;
- Using open-ended questions; and
- Employing the aid of various visual or task-based activities.

Building rapport

It has been asserted that children need at least some level of familiarity with the researcher before they will feel comfortable to relate their experiences (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Therefore establishing trust and a rapport with the child participant is crucial. The literature afforded many strategies of how to go about this, including;

- “Spending time with them [the children] doing things they would like to do, making the purpose of the research clear to them and taking a sincere and interested attitude to what they say and do” (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:26).
- “Leaving difficult questions until later in the interview process” (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:56).
- Gaining an awareness of the child’s family, cultural, intellectual and personal background (Wilson & Powell, 2001:70).
- Getting to know the children before the actual interview (Kortessluoma et al, 2003).
- Talking about yourself, by sharing some of your own experiences and views and always being open and honest (Mauthner, 1997; Harden et al, 2000:4.3; Kirby et al, 2003:45).
- Using task-based activities to start the interview. For example, Hill and colleagues (1996:160) decided to begin the interview by using a special illustrated ‘about myself’ sheet where children could write some basic details about themselves, their likes and dislikes.

This last technique also reinforced the point to children that the interview was about perceptions, not a matter of right or wrong answers (Hill et al, 1996:160). The fact that participants need to be assured that there are no right or wrong answers is essential when working with children (Kortessluoma et al, 2003).

Unstructured or semi-structured formats

Once rapport and trust have been established researchers need to maintain the interaction and cooperation of children (Hughes, 1989 cited in Kortessluoma et al,

2003). To do this, a flexible and fluid interview mode is essential. Ridge chose to use a “flexible, unstructured interview schedule...which was open at all times to incorporating new areas of interest and concern as they were identified by the children in the study” (Ridge, 2003:5-6).

A totally unstructured or semi-structured interview format - where “only the topics are predetermined and new questions or insights arise as a result of the discussion and visualised analyses” (Pretty, 1995:73) - can be difficult for some researchers to employ. However, NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005:55) state that “less structure can provide more opportunity to collaborate within the interview as it allows young participants more freedom to contribute in ways they want to”.

Enabling free narrative accounts

Allowing the respondents to lead the interview by being able to elicit a ‘free narrative’ from the child will be crucial in unstructured or semi-structured interviews.

“A free narrative account is ‘free’ in that the interviewer has not helped the child construct it. The interviewer has allowed the child to talk as much as possible before specific questions have been asked” (Wilson & Powell, 2001:49).

In employing this technique with children, it is important to always wait a few seconds before responding so that you don’t assume the child has finished what they are saying. By using ‘passive listening’ techniques (remaining silent and letting the child talk), you can communicate your interest and concern by non-verbal behaviour (Pretty et al, 1995:6).

Letting children provide a free narrative account also means that children will realise that their comments are taken seriously (Seefeldt, 1980 cited in MacNaughton, 2003:18).

Open-ended questioning

The type of questions the researcher asks will be paramount to maintaining dialogue with children. Most, if not all, the research examined in this literature review, emphasised the need for open-ended questions.

“Open-ended questions are questions that do not make assumptions or assume a particular answer, and encourage more than a two-or-three-word response” (Wilson & Powell, 2001:53). They commonly use the six helpers of Who? What? Where? Why? When? and How? (Pretty, 1995:76) and allow children to describe their views in their own words. Thus eliciting the child’s subjective frame of reference and increasing the reliability of the data (Kortessluoma et al, 2003:435).

Harden found that “the rapid dialogue that tended to characterise the interviews with children, made it easier to pick up on and probe further, almost everything the children said” (Harden, 2000:511). Therefore, using non-verbal prompts, repeating and rephrasing what the children say and using open-ended questions such as, ‘tell me more about that’ or ‘what happened next’ (Wilson & Powell, 2001:51) are particularly useful.

Asking children to describe specific events or activities, can also avoid monosyllabic responses and lead children into giving complete and descriptive responses (Horner, 2000:511). However, Scott (2003:108) warns that for younger children (eg. 8-9 years of age) these questions should relate to events or activities occurring in the ‘here and now’ or ‘very recent past’. In addition, it has been highlighted that questions about events, feelings (happiest, saddest, most embarrassing thing you can remember) and routines are much more useful than direct questions about the child him/herself (Williams, Wetton & Moon, 1989 cited in Mauthner, 1997:24; Farquhar, 1990; Mayall, 1994).

Researchers need to be particularly mindful of the language they are using with children. Interviewers may need to simplify wording (White, 1996) and use words with which children are familiar and comfortable. For example, Save the Children (2001) preferred not to use the term ‘interview’, rather referring to their interviews with children as ‘visits’.

Other open-ended questions that proved useful in some studies were; sentence completion exercises (Cavet, 1996 cited in Davis 1998; Hill et al, 1996; Harden 2000) or questions like the one used by Mason and colleagues (2003) with children in their study about children’s care experiences: “If you were interviewing someone who was in care or had been in care, is there a question you would like to ask them?”. Mason and colleagues found that children responded to this opportunity to frame their own question with enthusiasm (Mason et al, 2003:35).

Use of visual and task-based activities

Overwhelmingly though, the literature reinforced that interviews do not just have to be about talking. Many children may be quite comfortable with the idea of simply talking (McAuley & Brattman, 2003; Punch 2002a), but for others, and particularly younger children, using visual or task-based activities can be crucial in maintaining children’s interest and eliciting discussion throughout the interview process.

“Young people tend not to be as likely as adults to give long answers to open-ended questions (Harden et al, 2000) so stimulus material and prompts can enable them to expand their responses. The challenge is to strike a balance between not patronising young people and recognising their competencies but maintaining their interest and keeping the research familiar and relevant to them” (Punch, 2002a:54).

Researchers do not necessarily have to invent or use specific task-based techniques designed for children (of which an exhaustive list is provided further

into this report), rather they can adapt the tools usually used by researchers in any given interview scenario. For example, Mason, Urquhart & Bolzan (2003:35) gave children “their own copy of the interview guide – a colourful, simple and easy to read document. This guide was accompanied by a ‘tool box’ of pens, pencils, stickers and paper to assist those who wanted to make comments graphically”. Other researchers provided children with ‘worksheets’ containing open-ended and some closed questions (Punch, 2002b).

These techniques empowered children throughout the interview process, by allowing them to follow the interview process with their ‘guide’ or ‘worksheet’. The children were also aware of what topics and questions would be covered when, and they could respond in oral, written or more expressive formats, according to their own preferences and skills.

Focus groups and ‘activity days’

For quite some time now, focus groups have been a very popular method for engaging children in research. “Focus groups are generally regarded as unbeatable for generating ideas: they are seen as more fruitful than one-to-one work, less intimidating for young people and more cost effective” (Swords, 2002:23).

“It is often the case that members of a group feel encouraged to voice their opinions when others do so and are able to develop their points in response to the stimulation, challenge and memory prodding of what others say.” (Hill et al, 1996:134). In doing so, this allows for an in-depth collective discussion of issues (White, 1996).

The literature highlighted a number of issues that are important to consider when conducting focus groups. Perhaps the most important of these was highlighted by Horner who stated that, “It is critical that an open, supportive, non-threatening environment is maintained for the group participants so that sharing of insights and experiences does not become intrusive or stressful” (Horner, 2000:515).

“The group must [also] be given a clear explanation of the purpose and format of the planned discussion. Questions need to be straightforward and open-ended. From time to time there should be opportunities to check out with the group what are the key points emerging and to assess the degree of support for different viewpoints” (Krueger, 1994 cited in Hill et al, 1996:134).

In terms of format of the groups, “most researchers suggest that focus groups of young people should:

- include no more than five participants
- consider no more than four main questions
- take no longer than an hour
- provide young people with appropriate briefings
- ensure that participation is voluntary
- allow time to seek parental consent for children and vulnerable young adults, and
- make appropriate arrangements for feedback”
(Swords, 2002:23).

Some of the literature has suggested that it may also be appropriate to separate siblings into different groups, as “the age difference between them can create an imbalance with the eldest or youngest dominating or being excluded by the others” (Mauthner, 1997:23). Edwards (2003:8) ensured siblings were placed into separate groups to “allow for siblings to talk about their experiences without ‘monitoring’ of their story by the older/younger brothers and sisters”.

Some studies also separated groups by gender, however, this was dependent upon the subject being discussed and there were some differences in opinion as to how successful or appropriate this was.

An increasing trend noticed in the literature review was that focus groups are sometimes being replaced with ‘activity days’ (see Thomas & O’Kane, 1998 and

Mason & Urquhart, 2001). These sessions are usually longer than traditional focus groups, running for a half day or full day, with the other main distinguishing feature being that they generally revolve around the use of a number of small and large group task-based activities.

Activity days have been found to be “an excellent way of obtaining a large amount of information in a short time and making research enjoyable for children and young people. Activity days have been used to define topics for further research, to help set research aims and questions for already chosen research and collect group data on a topic” (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:99).

Visual and task-based techniques

As has been mentioned above, the use of a variety of visual or task-based techniques to put children at ease and elicit discussion has been the most distinguishing feature of the research conducted with children in recent times.

Some of the techniques and activities used by researchers have been borrowed or adapted from those traditionally used in therapeutic settings with children. However, many of the techniques have emerged from the “rapid expansion of new participatory methods and approaches used in the context of sustainable [international community] development” (Pretty et al, 1995:55). The most dominant of these new participatory approaches include, ‘Participatory Action Research’ (PAR) and ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (PRA).

PAR was inspired by the work of Paulo Friere and is research that “recognises explicitly its action and change-inducing component” (Wadsworth, 1993:81). It is also a research process “where theory and practice are constantly challenged through experience, reflection and learning” (Pretty et al, 1995:69).

PRA techniques “have developed in work with communities characterised by low levels of literacy, limited experience of interaction with government or bureaucracy, and language barriers. They tend therefore to be vivid, graphic and concrete, and not surprisingly turned out to work well with children” (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998:342).

It is suggested that researchers need to develop a range of these activities that will be suitable to the particular interests, knowledge and abilities of the children they are working with (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:68). The children should then be given some freedom of choice over which activities they choose and when to stop or change them (Save the Children, 2001:5)

The advantages in using such activities and techniques with children appeared to be infinite. For example, some advantages cited by the literature included:

- Makes the research fun for the child (Punch, 2002b:329; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:64-5).
- Focuses the child or young person's attention and overcomes problems encountered by the limited attention spans of small children (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:65).
- Sets the child at ease (Cavet, 1996 cited in Davis 1998:328; Harden, 2000:3.12; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:64-65).
- Reduces the power imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship (Morrow & Richards, 1996 cited in Davis 1998:328; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:64-65).
- Reduces pressure on children to talk or maintain eye contact where this is not comfortable (Harden, 2000; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:64-65).
- Provides a springboard for discussion (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:64-65).
- Gives children the time to think about their responses (Punch, 2002a:54).
- Recognises the diversity of individual tastes and skills of children (Punch, 2002a:55).

- Relieves boredom on the part of the participants (Harden et al, 2000; Punch, 2002b).
- Enables children to talk about complex and abstract issues and to interpret the social structures and relationships that affect their lives (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998:342).
- Enables researchers to triangulate and cross check data (Intrac 1997, Lucchini 1996 & Morrow 1999 all cited in Punch, 2002b).
- Prevents biases arising from over reliance on one method (Ennew & Morrow, 1994 and Morrow & Richards, 1996 all cited in Punch, 2002b).
- Can help take account of class, age, gender, disability, ethnicity or cultural differences (Punch, 2002b).
- Allows children to shape the agenda of the research sessions (Thomas & O’Kane, 2000:825).
- Children are more competent and confident with these activities (Punch, 2002b:329), possibly because they use a lot of them at school.
- Overcomes problems encountered by children not being familiar with traditional research interview techniques (James, 1995 cited in Davis, 1998:328).

Despite this long list of benefits, many researchers feel uncomfortable using such techniques. For these researchers, in particular, it will be important to spend time using the various methods with children before starting the research. Piloting techniques developed for the research project is always useful. As Laws and

Mann, (2004:57) remind us, “the time you have with children is precious, and you should prepare for it as well as possible”.

Most importantly though, before applying these techniques, “researchers...need to be critically aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each technique and the subsequent implications of the data produced” (Punch, 2002a:45).

Therefore, the remainder of this report offers suggestions of different techniques or tools that can be used and also, where possible, outlines the pros and cons of their application and in which circumstances they may be most usefully employed.

Drawing and other art forms

Drawing is one of the most popular and effective techniques employed in research with children. Some examples of the drawing and other artwork exercises used in recent research with children are listed below:

- Thomas & O’Kane (1998:342) used prepared sheets of paper for drawings with headings such as, ‘my favourite place’ or ‘what I would change with my magic wand’.
- Hill and colleagues (1996) used a similar technique asking children to draw on a sheet of paper with the title: ‘this is a child who is feeling because’
- The first task completed by homeless children in Jurak’s study was to pair up with another child and paint a hand to make a handprint (Jurak, 2003).
- The main task for these same children was to draw a three page time-line of their life experiences; one sheet representing their past, another sheet their present and the last their future (Jurak, 2003).

- MacNaughton and colleagues successfully asked a group of twelve children (up to 8 years of age) living in a women's refuge to build a model of their dream home (this included forming house rules and outlining acceptable behaviour etc.) (MacNaughton et al, 2003:54).
- Other art work techniques used by MacNaughton and colleagues included pottery, mosaics, drawing and painting (MacNaughton et al, 2003:20).
- Beazley and others (2005) gave children 30 minutes to complete drawings in individual interviews and group sessions, stating that it was important not to interrupt them, but to provide encouragement through praise of their drawings.
- Davis (1998:329) cited research completed by Levin (1994) where children were asked to draw their families.
- Comeau (2004:19) explains an exercise used that combined graffiti and jigsaw techniques: "Boards are put together prior to an activity and a large image is created across the boards. Boards are separated and given to each small group as a piece of the larger puzzle, and children draw/write their feelings about particular issues. Following the small group activity, each group presents and describes their piece of the puzzle to whole group and the puzzle is put together".

Some drawing exercises have been recognised as particularly helpful warm-up activities in one-on-one interviews or group sessions to alleviate anxiety and set children at ease (Kortessluoma et al, 2003 citing Faux et al 1998 and Backett & Alexander 1991). While other researchers have used drawing and other artwork techniques such as painting and ceramics as fun filler activities or the main data gathering tool of the research session.

In whatever format they are being used, drawing is effective because it gives children time to think about what they wish to portray. The image can also be changed or added to (Punch, 2002b:331). Importantly, it also allows children “the freedom to express views, imagination, and interpretation of the surrounding world in their own terms” (Sapkota & Sharma, 1996 cited in Thomas and O’Kane 2000:825).

Drawing, or other artwork, however, may not be a suitable technique to use with all children; some older children may be inhibited by a lack of artistic competence and may not consider drawing to be a fun method (Punch, 2002b).

Punch (2002b:322) also explains that particular care must be taken not to misinterpret the children’s drawings, by imposing adult interpretations in analysis. The literature warns that “there is a danger of reading in meanings which may not be there for the children themselves” (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999 cited in Harden et al, 2000:2.9). Therefore, we must “talk to the child about the meanings they themselves attribute to their painting or drawing” (Morrow & Richards, 1996:100). This can be done by asking children in an open way to explain what their drawing meant to them and why they decided to draw those images (Punch, 2002b:322).

Young & Barrett stated that this worked particularly well with the Kampala street children in their study. “When asked about what they had drawn, the majority talked freely increasing the quality of the information gathered...resulting in a much richer data set than could have been obtained from pictures or discussion alone” (Young & Barrett, 2001:145).

Timelines & Charts

Timelines and charts have been found to be a particularly useful tool when examining children's life experiences and the significant people and events that influence them.

One of the reasons they may be more successful than interview questions in eliciting children's experiences of significant events, and the context in which they arise, is that "a child locates the time of day or year using qualitative rather than quantitative terms – describing where he was at the time, or what other things were happening around that time" (Friedman, 1991 cited in Wilson & Powell, 2001:6).

Already mentioned above, was Jurak's use of timelines with homeless children. The children created a three page timeline reflecting where they came from, where they were going and where they are now. An important component of this exercise was to get the children to think about how they were feeling at different points and to identify what they would have liked to receive in the way of help at different times (see Jurak, 2003).

However, one limitation found in this study was that "All of the children were able to remember their experiences and make imagery about them...but they were not able to identify what they would have required from either refuge services or otherwise through the art medium in concrete terms" (Jurak, 2003:22).

Other researchers to have used timelines included Pain and colleagues (2002) in their study on crime. In this study children were asked to mark key points on their timeline where changes could have made a difference to their experience of an incident.

Thomas and O'Kane's (1998) study on children's input into decision-making used timelines to help the children to explain moves and changes in their lives and decision-making charts to identify who had influence and power over the

decisions that children make. Decision making charts were identified as one of their most useful strategies and it is a technique which has also been successfully used by Punch (2002a) and Aubrey and Dahl (2006).

'My week' charts were used with great success by Christensen & James (2003:166). The researchers in this study gave children a piece of paper with a circle drawn on it and children could use this, in any way they chose, to represent how their time was divided over any given week. Many children saw the circle as representing a pie chart and completed the activity accordingly.

Daily time lines were also used by Thomas and O'Kane (2000:825) to identify the choices that had to be made in its course and this technique was also noted as being used in group sessions with Kampala street children in Young & Barrett's study (See Young & Barrett, 2001).

Maps

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People assert that "maps constructed to describe a neighbourhood or a family and the child or young person's place in it...can elicit rich data" (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:66).

Maps could be drawn on pieces of paper or constructed as models using other art materials.

Hill and colleagues 1996 used 'ecomaps' to enable children to demonstrate which people were important to them and Young and Barrett (2001) used map drawing with street children in Kampala. Young and Barrett found that this technique was particularly helpful in identifying children's daily activities.

Guided tours

Save the Children (2001) found that one of their most useful techniques for gaining rapport and information from children was for the child to give the researcher a tour of their respite care facility. Prout (2002) also highlighted that guided walks of the child's neighbourhood is a useful technique to employ.

This technique assists with power imbalances as children are on their 'home ground' and it allows children to show researchers first hand how their environment impacts on their lived experience. Researchers are also given the advantage of being able to apply participant observation techniques (carefully observing how children interact with their natural environment).

Photography

Not many research projects allow researcher's access to children's private worlds on a 24 hour basis. Therefore, providing children with disposable cameras to capture images that they think are important to them, or that are reflective of their lived experiences, can be a very useful tool. This technique could also be particularly useful with older children, as it may be perceived as a more mature activity (Punch, 2002b).

Similar to drawing and other art work techniques it is important to ask the child to describe why they chose to take the photographs and what they represent. For example, when Punch used this technique with children living in rural Bolivia, the children wrote a brief paragraph about their photos describing what it showed and why they decided to capture the image (Punch, 2002b).

Disposable cameras were also provided to street children in Kampala. Young and Barrett (2001) stated that this worked 'exceptionally well', giving excellent coverage of children's daily lives that the researcher would not otherwise have been privy to or able to observe.

Spider diagrams

Spider diagrams are a similar tool to map drawing. It requires the child to draw a circle (or perhaps a picture of themselves) in the middle of the piece of paper and then to have legs coming off this where children can draw or write the things that are connected to the main body. Spider diagrams can be used to identify the key individuals or other service systems in a child's life and also to explore who children identify as their main sources of support.

Punch (2002a) used spider diagrams to explore and identify the people that were important to children and then in group sessions, as a brainstorming exercise, to identify ways that children cope with problems. For this last exercise, 'coping with problems' was written in the body of the spider and each child had to then add at least one leg identifying a strategy that they use to cope with problems.

In other circumstances spider diagrams can be used to make links between different issues or statements. This is done by drawing lines between statements or issues identified and written down by children, thereby making a spider's web. This can be particularly useful for group sessions to make links between different children's experiences or views.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming activities are one of the most common and useful tools to use in focus groups with children. Children are usually provided with a trigger word, question or issue, for which they are then able to engage in free flowing stream of consciousness responses. In a slight variation, Punch (2002a) used common phrases adults use, such as 'it's just a phase you're going through', in order to provoke responses from the children.

To ensure accurate interpretation of the data, it is important that children are given control over identifying the key points elicited from such exercises. To assist children in identifying key points picked up in brainstorming activities it can be useful to use large sheets of paper, post-it notes, coloured dots, pens or highlighters (Pain et al, 2002).

Grouping and Ranking exercises

In group sessions, brainstorming can be used in conjunction with grouping and ranking exercises. Punch (2002a) used these exercises to rank problems identified by children into big, middle and small concerns. This can also be done by getting children to physically move around the room and use their bodies as ‘markers’ at different points in a room to represent their opinions.

Diamond Ranking Exercises were used by O’Kane (2003:149) to explore children’s views on what issues are the most important for enabling them to take part in decision making. This entailed a list of nine statements being identified and written on post-it notes. Two diamond shaped grids with nine squares were also constructed and the children had to fit the post-it notes into the grid according to a hierarchy of most important to least important.

Visual Vignettes

Another very popular and versatile technique is to use pictures, photographs, cartoons or video clips to prompt discussion. These techniques allow researchers to delve into the medium of popular culture, an area that children will probably feel comfortable with.

“Vignettes may be used for three main purposes in social research: to allow actions in context to be explored; to clarify people’s judgements; and to provide a

less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics (Barter & Reynold, 1999 cited in Edwards, 2003:9).

There were many different examples found in the literature where researchers had used visual vignettes:

- Aubrey and Dahl (2006) showed children photographs of other children and were told that this child had a social worker – children had to tell them what was good or bad about having a social worker and anything else that they should know about it.
- In Mauthner’s research on poverty conducted with 7 year olds “the researcher showed each child a series of six photographs of different types of housing and asked each child to indicate which if any the children would want to live in and why. They were also asked to look at photographs of children and to consider if any of the children looked as if they might live in any of these homes and which of these children they were likely to befriend and why” (Mauthner, 1997:24).
- Punch (2002a) used 2 minute video clips from popular children’s soap operas. The children then had to discuss how the situation was dealt with in the show, how they would have reacted in the same situation, and if anyone they know or they themselves had experienced a similar problem. Punch stated that this worked well as a stimulus for discussion and as a useful memory-prodding technique (Punch, 2002a:51).
- Hill and colleagues (1996) used pictorial vignettes, asking children to explain what was happening in the pictures, what might have prompted it and how it could best be resolved.
- Davis (1998:329) also cited research completed by Beresford (1997) where video vignettes were used with child participants.

Stories and Case studies

Stories and case studies (or sometimes referred to as written or verbal vignettes) can be used to spark discussion and trigger memories of children's own experiences. This technique is especially useful when dealing with sensitive issues, as it allows the children to step-back from their own experience and discuss broader issues first, until they feel safe enough to then relate how their own experience may have differed to those in the story or case study.

As a variation on this technique Punch (2002a) used problem page letters from teen magazines: "The young people read the teenager's letter first and said what they thought the person concerned should do and what they would do if it was them" (Punch, 2002a:52).

For younger children, puppetry or other toys can be employed to assist in the story telling (see Bauchsbaum et al 1992 & Lentz 1985 cited in Davis, 1998:329 and MacNaughton et al, 2003:20).

Probably the most striking and effective use of stories found in the literature was employed by Edwards (2003) in a study with children aged 5-12 years who had experienced homelessness as a result of family violence. Parts of the one story were read (as chapters) over a series of group sessions with the children. Edwards explains:

"The children were told a story about two children and their experiences of escaping a violent household with their mother and the contacts the children had with service providers. This enabled the children to choose if and when they would disclose personal information whilst offering their expert opinions on what should have happened for the children in the story...All of the children clearly identified with the children and the issues confronting them in the vignette. This

was demonstrated by the children's involvement and concern for the children in the story and their suggestions for assistance for them (Edwards, 2003:9).

Music and Song writing

Edwards (2003) also used music and song writing with the children in the same group sessions. This process resulted in a lot of discussion and disclosure of personal experiences, as well as resulting in the children writing two songs over an 8 week period. This technique therefore can be quite empowering to the participants as they have something very tangible that they can take away from the research project.

This technique may also be particularly useful when working with culturally or linguistically diverse young people (Edwards, 2003:17). However, it does involve some level of expertise on the part of the researcher/facilitator and may necessitate the hire or purchase of expensive equipment.

Role Plays and Drama

Another technique that may appeal to the creativity of children, and that was used by a number of researchers in their group sessions was role playing (see Hill, 1996 cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005; Thomas & O'Kane, 2000; Swords, 2002).

“Role play methods can be developed by children or young people to portray events, life stories or issues that concern them” (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:70).

This technique helps researchers to understand how children perceive the role of significant others in their lives, and is likely to draw on the direct experiences that

children have had. Children can also be given more power over the research process if they are allowed to choose and/or direct the role-plays.

However, role plays cannot be rushed, they take time and require clear guidelines.

Researchers will also need to be sensitive to the following:

- Issues of control within groups of children – some children may want to dominate the process;
- Children who have less confidence may feel uncomfortable performing in front of an audience; and
- Older children may feel self-conscious about performing and may shy away from taking part” (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005:70).

Journals and Diaries

Journal or diary writing was just one example of the many written techniques applied in research with children. Of course the main consideration with any written techniques should be the literacy level of children involved in the study. This technique can also be quite time consuming and may have to be completed outside the research setting, requiring a strong commitment from the participants.

However, a wealth of information can be recorded by journal writing, which is firmly based on children’s experiences of the here and now. Other advantages outlined by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005:72) included; “writing can be a powerful way to help children and young people reflect on a topic and express their ideas, thoughts and feelings. Free writing gives participants the opportunity to move outside the researcher’s understanding of the topic. Writing can be a useful method when participants feel uncomfortable talking about an issue”.

As well as free writing based on children's experiences, diaries can be used to record specific events, enabling better accuracy than may be provided by simply asking children to remember details of everyday activities. For example:

- Beazley and colleagues (2005) asked children to write diaries to record information on punishments they received;
- The Family Expenditure Survey in the UK incorporated expenditure diaries completed by children (Scott, 2003); and
- The Home On-Line study used time-use diaries with children aged 9-15 years (Scott, 2003).

Essays, postcards and other written activities

As mentioned above, there were many examples of written activities provided in the literature. Children are used to completing this sort of work at school and they were found to be very useful, especially when discussing sensitive issues.

Written techniques included writing essays (see Beazley et al, 2005) or writing about hypothetical future situations (see Hallden, 1994 cited in Davis 1998:328).

Aubrey and Dahl (2006) in their study of the care and protection system found that one effective strategy was for children to write a postcard to their social worker, saying what was good about having them.

Pretty (1995:216) described a technique called the 'problem hat'. Where participants are required to write down a problem they are experiencing and put it in a hat. Then each participant pulls a piece of paper out of the hat and suggests how the anonymous person could deal with the problem.

Other researchers used pre-prepared worksheets for children to complete. For example, some of the activities included in worksheets were:

- Closed and open-ended questions for children to complete (Punch, 2002b).
- Invitations for children to convey their fantasy wishes (Hill et al, 1996).
- Sentence completion exercises (see Cavet, 1996 cited in Davis, 1998; Hill et al, 1996; Harden et al, 2000; Beazley et al, 2005).
- Beazley and colleagues (2005) used drawings of ‘protection tools’ such as umbrellas, shields or a jacket. The children were asked to write something in each section of the drawing to represent things such as happiest memory, person you love most, what makes you feel safe etc. This activity was done to end the sessions and left the children with positive feelings and readily identified support mechanisms.
- Beazley and colleagues (2005) also used attitude surveys – a list of statements that children were required to agree or disagree with.

Secret box

Another written technique that proved to be particularly useful was a ‘secret box’. Punch (2002a) asked children to write down a problem that they had experienced, but had never told anybody about. The children then deposited their answers into a sealed box, allowing them anonymity. This provided researchers with a wealth of information that the children would otherwise have not disclosed during the research process and is therefore a very useful strategy when dealing with sensitive issues.

One limitation found by Punch with this method was that responses could not be probed further and this could therefore lead to some difficulties in interpretation.

Other tools or props

Props such as **'feeling cards'**, borrowed from therapeutic work with children, are very non-threatening for children and may be useful for children of all ages.

Cards showing pictures of people's faces expressing different emotions were used successfully by Hill, 1996 (cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005), McAuley, 1996 (cited in Thomas & O'Kane, 2000), Save the Children, 2001 and Scott, 2003. While Harden and colleagues used cards showing risky situations (Harden et al, 2000).

Another useful prop, this time borrowed from participatory rural appraisal techniques, was **'pots and beans'**.

Examples of this technique can be found in Aubrey & Dahl (2006) and Thomas & O'Kane (1998). These researchers used 'pots and beans' to ask children to rate their last child protection review meeting. The children were required to rate their involvement in different aspects of the meeting by dropping one, two or three beans into a pot.

Computer based data collection

Computer based data collection methods access mediums of communication with which most children are familiar and comfortable and which they commonly associate with fun and privacy. Aubrey and Dahl (2006:29) confirmed this stating that there is evidence to show that children enjoy computer based assessment.

Lawrence (2003) in a study with secondary school aged students chose to use computer based surveys as their main mode of data collection because, “computer-based data-collection gives participants privacy when answering questions about sensitive issues, allowing them to work individually, anonymously and without adult interference” (Locke & Gilbert, 1995 and Millstein & Irwin, 1993 all cited in Lawrence, 2003:9).

Lawrence (2003:9) asserts that “in such research environments, participants are more willing to disclose their genuine attitudes and beliefs...In well-designed and attractively presented interactive programs participants are able to work at their own pace, and to revise and update concepts and instructions. These interactive environments, accordingly, reduce stress and enhance young people’s informed involvement in the collection of quality information.”

Conclusion

Working out how to best engage children in research about sensitive issues, involves more than a superficial examination of current research methodologies and data collection techniques.

The literature review highlighted that the decisions we make about research with children, are inherently influenced by the way we think about childhood and view children’s place in society. As such, the first step for researchers embarking on a study with children, may be making a shift from traditional notions of childhood to one that respects children’s competencies and their right to be listened to. It is

only after this commitment is made that decisions can be reached about what general research approach will be taken.

The literature demonstrated that for research practices to remain consistent with new ideologies of childhood, researchers need to ensure that children are afforded the right to informed consent and to have access to appropriate levels of protection, privacy and confidentiality.

Researchers also need to be committed to acknowledging and addressing the power imbalances that exist in the adult researcher – child participant relationship and to sustain a commitment to reflexive work practices throughout the duration of their study.

In achieving this, the literature concluded that researchers should adopt a child-centred participatory approach to research. Enabling children, as much as possible to be involved in all aspects of the research process, including giving them a real choice of how and when to participate.

Participants should be able to choose whether to be involved in one-on-one or group sessions, or a combination of the two. They should also be given the opportunity to provide data in a way that meets their individual needs and preferences. This requires researchers to develop a flexible interview schedule that includes a ‘tool-kit’ of carefully selected visual and task-based techniques.

Above all else, the literature review revealed that it is certainly possible for children, of all ages, to be effectively engaged in research on sensitive issues. In fact, the process of doing this can not only be enlightening and empowering to the participants, but also to the researchers themselves.

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