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Ethical and Methodological Associations in Doing Research on Children in a School Environment

Abstract

The new paradigm in social research on children, accepting the child as an important social actor, has its methodological and ethical specifics. In doing research on children, child-friendly research techniques are used with an emphasis on children's rights. The attempt of the researcher to apply a new method in studying children may come into conflict with the authoritarian approach to children in the school environment, where such research most often takes place. We shall examine both the conflicts between school situations and the expectations of the new approach to children in the following material using the experience of our own research on children.

Keywords: school environment, research on children, ethics in research, child as a social actor

Introduction

Social research on children and childhood increasingly recognizes children as independent actors, active participants in family life, and as research subjects and co-researchers as well. According to researchers, children are not excluded from the general need for individual reflection of the actual biography given by postmodern discourse (Moxnes 2003 Greene, Hogan 2005) and are able to attach their own meaning to the events in society and formulate their own opinions, important not only for the effort to understand the lives of the children themselves (Davies 2005, James 2007).

In the area of methodology the new paradigm has stirred extensive academic debate on the methodological and ethical aspects of such research (cf. Alderson 2000; Christensen and Prout 2002). The development of innovative research techniques with emphasis on the active involvement of children in research is the result (Bautsz-Sontag 2011). This perspective is in direct contrast to the previous (though not completely suppressed) research approach to children, which has been criticized because of its devaluation of child behavior as predictable and which used the testimony of adults to interpret child behavior (Conroy and Harcourt 2009).

Although children are increasingly seen as competent social actors, they are spending more and more time in different age-structured institutions, where they are separated from the adult world and left outside the sphere of issues and decision-making of the adult members of society (Heath et al 2007: 405). These institutions apply a specific power over children (Kaščák 2008) and their normal operation is often at odds with the notion of children as independent and actively reflective participants in social life. Any attempt to accomplish a research design that respects the child as a social actor, therefore, comes into conflict with the normal research environment where considering the child to be independent and thinking on his own, with his own rights, is not the norm. The tension between the obligation of the researcher (whether or not formally given) towards both ethics and the child actor, respecting the concept of the research on the one hand and the terms of the institutions in which the research is performed on the other, is an important issue in the ongoing debate about the methodology of research on children (Heath et al. 2007).

We decided to use this material to contribute to the debate on the methodological and ethical aspects of doing research on children, inspired by our own research on children and the problems we encountered in the course of it. As shown by our experience and the experience of other researchers (e.g., Morrow, Richards, 1996), individual actors in research on children may not be ready for a new approach and the school environment makes it impossible for researchers to fully apply it. In the following material, we would mainly like to reflect on how to apply the approach to children as social actors, i.e., what are the limits and possibilities of this approach, in terms of doing research in the school environment.

We principally draw on our experience with qualitative research, carried out under the title “Family through the Eyes of Children”. It took place between 2011 and 2012 at two primary schools – urban and suburban. The goal was to answer the question of what importance the family holds for the child, how he sees the family, and what relationships and activities keep its members together. Our effort

was to determine what family positions the child attributes to its individual members and to himself, and to ask what effect the gender of the child and the various family arrangements in which the child lives have on this perception.

We focused on two age groups of children: pupils of the third (8–9 years old) and seventh (12–13 years old) grade. The research was conducted in classrooms during school hours, in five to six non-consecutive lessons. The research was conducted in each school for about two months. Three third grade classes and two seventh grade classes were included in the research. In total, we collected data from 84 children – 43 boys and 41 girls. In addition to the techniques commonly used in doing research on adults (interviews, focus group), we applied the techniques of cognate childhood expression (drawing, writing, games) in this research.

In view of the inspiration of the new sociology of childhood, it was essential for us during the research to perceive the child informant as a valuable social actor and an equal partner in the research, and to ensure the observance of his rights (Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller 2005). Specifically, we decided to obtain informed consent not only from the children's parents, but also from the children themselves and to create and maintain during the collection of data a classroom atmosphere of mutual cooperation, where the children could freely express themselves. This effort, however, often clashed with the school environment where the research was conducted and where children are socialized under the conditions of age (or gender) power hierarchy (Jarkovská 2009).

Cooperation with child research participants and adult gatekeepers

Contacting potential respondents and obtaining access to them is the first challenge in general in conducting research and in particular research with children, because this approach often requires discussion from the start with several actors – with teachers, headmasters, children and their parents.

In our research we proceeded through the acquaintance of one of the researchers with the selected teacher, who arranged a meeting with the head teachers. A positive reception by the head teachers was probably facilitated by the fact that we are a group of women-researchers supported, moreover, by research institutions operating at universities. In the case of the first school, a rural one, an important role was played by the fact that the school has not yet had much experience with similar research, which is more often performed in larger urban schools.

The literature on the ethical aspects of research with children emphasizes the specifics of informed consent from the children (Cree, Kay, and Tisdall 2002). Presenting participation in the research as entirely voluntary, regardless of the consent of the parents or teachers, entails the risk of refusal and the practical necessity of keeping the children who will not be participating in the research busy on the one hand, and on the other it means respect for the children as partners in research and for those whose decisions are presented as essential.

Efforts to obtain consent from children – research participants – is an expression of respect for the opinion of all actors in the research, but the researcher can often willingly “complicate” the research because school regulations do not require this procedure. The key person, the one who as authority mediates the relationship of the children with the researchers and to a large extent defines the position of the individual actors in the research process, is usually the teacher, who announces the presence of the researchers and identifies them by name. The willingness and helpfulness of teachers and their attempt to ensure the authority and cooperation of students for the researchers, however, may be counterproductive: Researchers describing their experiences from the field (Dvořáková, in Švaříček, Šedová, 2007) reflect on the impact of the teacher introducing them as “teachers” and their passing one of the pupils into their “charge”, which probably reinforced his image as a “pet” among the others (he was an important informant for the researchers), had on their relationship to the pupils. Jarkovská (2013: 51) also describes how the teacher in the class where she collected data for her ethnographic research introduced her as a person conducting sociological research, “which is something like a psychologist” and that the children were to behave towards her and answer her questions. Such introduction basically cost the researcher space for what she wanted to do, namely discuss the research with the children and their involvement in it.

The position of the researcher in a school environment is usually marked by ambivalence – trying to establish a good relationship with the students as informants, while not losing the favor of the teachers, because the possibility of remaining in that environment depends on them. The researcher can thus find himself in the role of a disruptor of the educational process if he approaches the children as the teacher’s right hand when, e.g., he supervises the children, admonishes them or even substitutes for the teacher, and the occupation of one of these positions may not be a matter of choice, rather it can result from making quick decisions such as whether to get the information necessary for school work from a particular child (Thorne 1993). Also, our research is an example of how intermediaries may unconsciously interfere with the intentions of the researchers during their entry into the environment and in the course of the research.

In our case, one of the teachers did not want to accept the refusal of some of the children to complete some assigned tasks or the expression of their disagreement with certain techniques of data collection and tried to get them to cooperate by using authoritative means, which was contrary to our intention to let the children refuse to cooperate at any time during data collection. The chance to be alone with the children, made possible by other teachers, gave us the opportunity to conduct research without the possible influence of the teacher. On the other hand, this put us in the situation of having to take on the role of classroom authority, e.g., in an attempt to maintain order in the classroom in order to collect the data or to preclude unsafe behavior by the children.

Moreover, it was difficult to explain to the children and often to the adult gatekeepers as well what the research was for, especially when its results were not “immediate”. Trying to explain the purpose of the research can result in unexpected impacts; Thorne (1993) described to the children participants in her research that she would be taking notes during the observation with the goal of writing “what kids do”. She had to change this formulation, however, because the children associated the word “do” with disciplinary infractions and stressed that they were “doing nothing”. In our attempt to explain to the children what our research entailed, we encountered the fact that the term research can represent different things (“Research is when you take blood from people,” a girl, third grade, rural school). Although we described to the children, as accurately as possible, what the research meant and what we would do with the results, it is obvious that our description, even though adapted to the child’s understanding, could only lead to a very abstract notion in children about what research is. Even one of the teachers, despite our repeated explanations of the purpose of the research, expected us to create psychological profiles of the children, which we were not able to provide. This further deepened our sense of commitment and dissuaded us from any effort to project our own conception of research.

Getting the children to agree to participate in the research by requesting it in writing was ordinarily conceived as a routine and formal affair, although the possibility not to participate in the research meant relative freedom for them, albeit within class (the children not participating could quietly pursue activities of their choice, such as reading and drawing). The pupils’ reluctance to decide on their participation in the research may be variously interpreted as the specific content of school time not being important to them, or that they are not used to expressing their opinion and in some respects are not taken too seriously by adult gatekeepers, which corresponds to their position in a society dominated by adults. Automatically agreeing to an outside task is also easier than devising ways and

means of avoiding it beforehand, and so any disagreement is then reflected during the research process rather than at the beginning of it.

In our research, we found indirect ways of the refusal to participate, e.g., by handing in blank pieces of paper, expressing irony or boredom, or by leaving their desks. We were not always able to fully explain the reasons for a lack of interest (despite repeated questions concerning it) and so react to it. In conditions where pupils consider schoolwork to be compulsory and do not perceive any space for rejecting it outright, it can easily happen that they will express their opposition to the research tasks only with patterns of behavior available to actors who find themselves in an uneven power struggle (e.g., through manipulation, deceit, rebellion, etc.) (Bourdieu 2000). A child's statement of this type of refusal need not be necessarily devalued, just the opposite – the use of irony, humor, vulgarity or exaggeration shows the relationship of children to the topic, as well as their sensitivity and delicacy, which is a natural reaction in this situation.

On the other hand, as pointed out by Cree, Kay, and Tisdall (2001), it is naive to assume that children will automatically be enthusiastic and willing to cooperate when the researchers want them to share their experiences, problems and outlook with them. Privacy and mystery are important for children (Clark and Moss, 2001) and like adult actors they may prefer the chance to talk about many things or remain indecisive about them. The topic raised by researchers, moreover, need not be interesting or relevant for them. Often, rather than joint interviews, children appreciate new fun activities with adults or the chance to really get to know them in everyday life, without constant questions and research tasks (Cree, Kay, Tisdall, 2001). The researcher must balance his objectives regarding the collection of data with respect for the child's world.

Conclusion

By deciding to carry out research on children within the school environment, particularly Czech basic school environment (Novotný et al. 2014), and based on the foundation of the new childhood sociology, the researcher is entering an environment where his position and objectives come into conflict with the prevailing practice – an environment typical of hierarchies, power relations between the adult and the child, where adults tend to make decisions for children and where the child's actions are automatically trivialized (Morrow, Richard 1996). It is an institution where the rules, time, spatial arrangement and daily routine are in conflict with the researcher's conception of the child as an independent-minded actor.

In the Czech Republic there are no original, more extensive ethical standards reflecting the issues of doing research on children, although the existence of similar standards in other countries is common, whether at the level of institutions or as recommendations of individual authors (e.g. Christensen, Prout 1995). At the same time, the practice of establishing ethics committees at research institutions or universities to monitor compliance with ethical rules and, more generally, to guarantee the quality of research is not very common, even in research on adults. This leads to, *de facto*, lack of compulsion and looseness in choosing and observing ethical rules. Research practice, therefore, becomes very random and the observance of ethical rules in the course of research depends entirely on the individual commitment of researchers and gatekeepers.

The codification of ethical rules for research on children can be an opportunity for the systematic documentation of a wide range of problems of this type of research and their availability (Christensen, Prout, 2002: 491). However, the observance of ethical principles in practice is rarely straightforward and a variety of situations that may occur during the research process can never be fully captured by pre-established standards. Some research procedures that have proven successful in a particular environment may have a different effect and be counterproductive in another context. For example, efforts to obtain children's informed consent in a signed form are usually seen as a way of highlighting the competency of children and their independent decision-making. In this context, however, some authors speak of evoking a sense of obligation in children's by having them sign their consent, which can then be seen as a burden in the course of research (Hill 2005).

The problem related to blurring the boundary between research activities and school obligations may be partially resolved by sensitive communication with child participants, by explaining the purpose of the research and highlighting the fact that the answers are neither right nor wrong. A solution can also be the use of participatory, imaginative and collective research techniques (focus group, drawing, etc.) that weaken the asymmetry of the relationship between the researcher and child (Mahon and Glendinning 1996). At the same time, it is necessary to devote a certain amount of time to establishing a trusting relationship with children (Punch 2002) and determining what techniques they themselves prefer and why. The ethnographic approach is generally recommended as particularly suitable for capturing children's experiences because it helps the researcher to "better deal with ethical dilemmas that occur in various research situations" (Eder and Corsaro 1999: 528).

Excluding the impact of the power superiority of the adult researcher over children is impossible in research (Jensen and McKee 2003), because the differen-

tiation of adults/children is one of the main organizational principles of the school environment and the researcher overlapping these categories can be a source of confusion and discomfort for the examined subject. As one of the possible solutions to this ambivalence, Warming (2011) recommends the conscious assumption of the role of “the last adult” (e.g., by submitting to the authority of other adults and refusing to proceed as such an authority); according to him, this role allows the researcher to gain greater access to the world of children and to more naturally engage in children’s activities than would be possible if we left the definition of his role as an adult person to the judgment of the children participants in the research themselves.

Getting closer to the ideals of the new paradigm in the research on children could be possible through an ethnographic approach, also including involved observations and extended stays with the children in school beyond mere strict, time-limited data collections during several visits at schools, or meeting them in a less formal setting, such as on a school trip or lessons in the countryside. This would allow the researcher not only to get to know the children better, but to adapt or invent research techniques based on the immediate context and immediate reactions of individual children.

Although this procedure makes it possible to obtain more valid data, at the same time it creates familiar dilemmas and completely new ones. It is obvious that the helpfulness of teachers to researchers is limited, i.e., it depends on running the school – fulfilling the duties of the teachers and education of the children. The prolonged and intense presence of the researcher in the classroom implies a major impact not only on the ordinary course of instruction, but also on the lives of the children who form a relationship with the researcher, and this raises the question of to what extent this procedure is at all legitimate. What actually is the role of the researcher and how should it be played out in the classroom? How to balance out the relationship between teachers and children over the long term? How to ensure that he shapes a relationship with the children if, in his view, this relationship is something purely instrumental and limited? It is clear that none of the possible methods of research on children in the school environment (or elsewhere) offers simple and unequivocal ethical and methodological rules and they can only encompass efforts to minimize various risks associated with current research conditions.

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