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Children's participation in research: tensions and dilemmas around ethical practice

Udział dzieci w badaniach: napięcia i dylematy wokół praktyki etycznej

Abstract: Research with children is influenced by researcher's own perspectives and the diverse constructions including socio cultural perspectives of childhood. Are young children respected and cared for or overlooked by the practitioner or researcher's personal goals in research? Are issues, related to ethics in relation to children's consent and participation in research lost in translation especially in terms of expectations and interpretation in different cultural contexts. This paper explores the diverse perspectives of issues around ethics related to research with young children in early years settings. It questions the perceived tensions around adults' decisions about children's participation in research. The issues related to children's voice, gatekeepers of consent, participation, power, and children's rights will be discussed and the extent to which they influence the decisions which adults make about children's participation in any research.

Keywords: children's rights, ethical practice, young children, consent, children's participation.

Introduction

This paper explores the role of children in research process and how the researchers are engaged in gaining their consent to participate in research in different cultural contexts. The complexities surrounding consent or assent to participate or otherwise, are discussed acknowledging the continuing ethical dilemmas in research with young children. Article 12 of the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), United Nations (1989), states that children have the right to be heard and the right to convey their views in matters of importance to them. There is a caveat however which suggested that a child may not always be capable of forming their own views which presents researchers with certain responsibilities (NSPCC, 2023). This is not about children's perceived incapacities but a requirement in the research process to see and accept how children articulate their views. Article 12 clarifies that due weight is given to the age and maturity of the child and their ability to freely express their views. This raises ethical issues regarding how researchers interpret children's participation and work with children. This is paramount to consider how the power is balanced between the researcher and the child, so that they both understand their distinct place within the research process. It is important to research children's perspectives and use child friendly methodologies to explore.

Children's participation in research has always been considered a complex issue and is influenced by the family and cultural contexts in which the child is from (Hart, 1992). Article 13 of the UNCRC notes that 'the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice' (Unicef.org.uk, 1989, p. 5). Despite being a signatory of the UNCRC, several countries interpret articles 12 and 13 in different ways. These interpretations differ in relation to how childhood and children are constructed and perceived in society and their role in the research process (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt, 2014). These are shaped by local culture and contemporary political contexts that influence ethics around research with children.

There are formal recommendations providing guidance around research ethics on working with children in different contexts. These include British Educational Research Association that provides Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA 2018), the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (Universities UK 2012), the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2003) and the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (2010). These are often referred to as principles for researchers guiding ethical behaviour and for deciding on the 'right' thing to do in a given research situation.

Competency to Consent

Children are considered not to be capable of making decisions despite legislation and policy documentation which advocate rights of children to be listened to such as Children Act 2004, in the UK, DfE (2012). This is determined by how children are perceived, and childhoods are constructed in different cultural contexts. When research is conducted with children, consent for children's participation is often requested from adults, specifically parents, carers, or staff responsible for the child in the formal setting the child attends. Teachers, early years practitioners or managers may assume responsibility for making the crucial decision around a child's participation in research. Research ethics committees expect professionals, parents, carers of children and institutions to be protective of children and their welfare. So, they may presume they have a right to make decisions about children's participation in research irrespective of children's own wishes to participate or not.

The tension exists between celebrating young children's proficiency and the prerequisite of adult, specifically parents to provide consent to participate in research. The protection of participants in research is vital. Manning (2000, p. 250) reminds researchers about the uncomfortable truth that 'far from protecting the research subjects, [the consent form] is a mechanism for protecting the investigators from litigation'. Although Manning's suggestion is context specific, the essential aspect of securing, maintaining, and defending the welfare of research participants cannot be tokenistic.

Alderson and Morrow (2004, p. 96) define consent as 'the invisible act of evaluating information and making a decision, and the visible act of signifying the decision'. They further suggest that researchers consider a range of issues such as providing opportunities for children to ask questions; allowing time to make decisions and that they can consult others and change their minds. This could depend on the researchers' perspectives about gaining consent from children or adults as gate keepers.

Hierarchy of Consent

Researchers are expected to get permission from a range of people and committees in the organisation where they are from as well as the setting where they hope to acquire the data. It is an 'uncomfortable irony' (Hood et al, 1996, p. 121) that obtaining consent from institutional committees and adults might lead to hierarchies of consent emerging and children might get ignored in the process by adult gatekeepers (Balen et al., 2006; Heath et al., 2007; Morrow and Richards, 1996). Children are considered able to be active

in providing consent for their participation in research as well as dependent upon adults as mediators. Alderson and Morrow (2004) urge researchers to routinely seek parental consent for those under 18 years of age. BERA (2018) guidelines stipulate that consent cannot be given by anyone other than the participant/s in all stages of data collection. Researchers working with children are advised to seek the 'collaboration and approval' of guardians or responsible adults such as teachers or social workers.

Researchers who seek consent from adults for children to participate in research may create an imbalance of power where children may be forced into participation by adults. A child may not be expected to challenge adults' decisions, especially in professional settings, so their willingness to participate or not in research is compromised, or even taken for granted. Researchers in certain situations are being tokenistic when securing consent from several gate keepers (adults) when children are disregarded. Himes and Saltarelli (1996, p. 25) warn against the risk of 'trivializing' participation of children. This overlooks children's rights and feelings in relation to their involvement in research that can be avoided.

Ladder of participation

The rationale behind the choice of children as research participants has been criticized by several authors. Hart (1992) referred to the ladder of participation that represented the way in which children are included in a research project based on the degree of participation. The ladder of participation (Arnstein, 2007), a metaphor originally related to adult participation, describes the level of engagement of children ranging from meaningful participation to non-participation. This engagement of children in research is usually initiated by the adult's agenda (Lansdowne, 2005). If a child is not eager to participate in research despite the adult's consent, those signs must be recognized by the researcher and respected (Gallagher, 2009). It will be the researcher's responsibility to ensure consent is secured from children at all stages of research and that they are engaging in research in appropriate ways (Christensen and Prout, 2002). This must be adhered to in every single stage and context of data collection with children. If the data is collected on more than one occasion when research study is longitudinal or if more than one researcher is involved, all researchers must obtain appropriate consent from children, irrespective of ways in which consent has been sought (Harcourt and Conroy, 2009). Adults must make sure they redress the power imbalances between adults and children.

Process consultation

The BERA Guidelines recommend that 'Researchers should do everything they can to ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they can, what is involved in a study. They should be told why their participation is necessary, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used and how and to whom it will be reported (British Educational Research Association, 2018, p. 9). Researchers must be aware of children's signals to articulate their consent and dissent to participate in a research process. The signals of dissent could be misinterpreted as being shy. McKechnie (2006) referred to explicit demonstrations of opposition to participation in research, but Alderson and Morrow (2004) note a more passive resistance in being silent. This must be interpreted as expressive dissent and not understood as quiet and implicit compliance. On the other hand, Helgesson (2005) suggested that it was acceptable to make decisions on behalf of the child if the child's own good was considered, however Alderson and Morrow's (2004) notion of child's silent dissent may become an ambiguous circumstance that can be easily misconstrued.

Children must be enabled to express their views, including demonstrating their consent, whether this is through actions, gestures, vocalisations, or representations. Article 13 of the UN Convention (United Nations, 1989) specified that children's views may be expressed in a variety of ways appropriate to the child. Archard (1993) confirmed that rights enabled dignity and allowed for an independent expression of oneself. Dockett and Perry (2007, p. 55) further suggested the possibility of sharing information about research in appropriate ways with the very young, to enable them 'to make decisions about their environment'. These decisions could include children's fluctuating levels of participation with the things and people around them. Nutbrown (1998) advocates that every adult, every educator, indeed everyone, has the responsibility of upholding and extending children's rights. This must extend into research with young children and how they may demonstrate or withdrew their consent throughout the research process.

Harcourt and Conroy (2005, p. 574) urged researchers to consider how children could be invited to record their agreement for observational research and offered suggestions which appeared to be intent on children documenting their consent. They recommended that 'researchers must be open to the particular 'language' that child wished to access at any time'. This suggested a much broader and unconventional approach to consent with the very young. In this context, the reference to 'language' should include the

overtly expressed and the covertly indicated. Whether very young children need to record their consent could be disputed, but what should not be in doubt, is an approach to the issue of consent which acknowledges that children's actions, vocalisations, talk, and behaviour adopted at any given time, may be their indication of consent, and should be accepted as thus in the research process.

Researchers should be sensitive to what best suits the young participants and accept an approach to consent with the very young which reconsiders the traditional elements of information, assent, dissent, permission, and agreement. Researchers must consider how and to what extent at any given time, children indicate their willingness or otherwise to be accompanied as they go about their business in an early years setting. Researchers should also be aware that consent should be obtained through different stages of research and participants should know they can withdraw from research when they wish to at any point. (Flewitt 2005). Further, children must be given clear information to enable them to make decisions about their participation irrespective of whether adults are happy for them to participate or not. If a child is unable to make their decision, the researcher must facilitate by using methods appropriate to the child's age and ability. Sometimes this may require the researcher to adapt the ways of presenting and obtaining information. Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry (2012, p. 253) reported that it is essential that children are provided with 'genuine choices' about participation. A child's understanding of the research project and its implications before giving their consent/assent / dissent is a matter of responsibility for the researcher. Within this context, the researcher must help the child in developing some sense of meaning of the research project and its implications for the child.

The researcher must consider the context in which the children are engaged in research. The social construction of childhood would influence the way in which a child would respond to a researcher adhering to ethics. Tisdall and Davis (2004) warned that the consent of children to participate and their involvement in research is variable in different cultural contexts. In certain cultures, adults as well as children might find the actions of the researcher to be artificial and uncomfortable, for example, when a child is requested for their consent or given a choice to participate in research. It may be, even, considered inappropriate for an adult to seek the child's consent in some cultures. It will be the responsibility of the researcher to negotiate consent with the child through transparent discussions and important for the researcher to be compassionate to the needs of the participants especially

children and consider the process of obtaining consent as a dynamic process rather than static (Simons and Usher, 2000)

Guided by a set of moral principles and practices, ethical symmetry suggests that 'researchers often have to rely on their own personal judgment in their everyday ethical practice' (Christensen and Prout 2002, 489). The responsibility lies with the researcher to reflect upon their assumptions and approaches about children's decisions on participation in the research by considering not only what children say, but also understand how they and adults around them, act and the contexts of their words and actions.

Through reflective ethical practice, any perceived gap between adult researchers and child participants' understandings can be closed by encouraging self-awareness on the part of the researcher regarding assumptions about contexts of childhood and how this may influence the research process. David et al. (2005, p. 127) recommended that researchers working with children must "critically reflect upon their own assumptions, values and aims, the impact of each in shaping the research process, and the potential effect on those who are recruited as participants".

Dilemmas and solutions

Social construction of childhood might question the concept of obtaining consent from children in different cultural contexts. Williams and Cleland (2007) emphasised the importance of family in Asian cultures and referred to 'vertical and hierarchical structure' and further indicated that "one's status in the order is usually determined by age, gender, generation and birth order" (Williams & Cleland, 2007, p. 86). Some of the researchers' own assumptions and values around children providing consent, especially in diverse cultural contexts where it is not appropriate to get children's consent, may be a hindrance in obtaining children's opinions. Consent from children should not be taken as a tokenistic measure but embraced as an adult's responsibility. This is especially relevant, when research is an international collaboration and conducted with colleagues in diverse cultural contexts in various countries from Global North and Global South, and who have different values and expectations related to consent obtained from children.

Gallagher et al (2010) highlighted several problems around informed consent and its implications on the participant in the future. The researcher may not be able to anticipate the long-term consequences of their research on the participants. For example, there will be limited opportunity to retract children's participation in research, to publish data such as photos in the public domain. Furthermore, the adult or the child who is consenting to

participate in the research may misunderstand or misinterpret the research aims or forget or ignore the information provided.

Within this context, consent to children's participation is the conscious acceptance of unconscious consequences which Heath et al (2007, p. 413) inferred in stating that '… "consent" may be based on little more than a desire to please, or a fear of the consequences of not being seen to be co-operative'. As young children can record their consent in non –verbal ways especially with adults who are familiar to them, this may be challenging for inexperienced or single researchers with limited time. They may overlook their responsibility for acquiring permission from children, having already secured this from several layers of gatekeepers of consent.

Homan (1991) expresses the common concern that informed consent is increasingly used to protect researchers and institutions from litigation, rather than protecting research participants from exploitation, or promoting the ongoing, thoughtful consideration of the research process as it unfolds (Finlay and Gough, 2003). Allen (2005) criticizes the tokenistic ways adopted by researchers. He believes that 'for many, "doing ethics" has been reduced to … filling out a form and seeking ethical clearance from an ethics committee, rather than a process of reflecting upon the ethical issues in a proposed research design'. (p15) Further, Skelton (2008) points to the guidelines and protocols around research involving children that universities adhere to be challenging. Ethics committees approving research projects may overlook key issues around consent and protection of children (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Powell & Smith, 2006),

Sometimes, the complex protocols associated with ethical issues especially to gain consent from young children might be perceived to be a hassle. So, researchers may refrain from conducting research with children rather than following the expectations.

Arnott et al. (2020) have recommended any researcher working with young children to consider four factors for informed consent 1. Opportunities for informed consent need to be created; 2. Consent should be negotiated continuously; 3. Pedagogically-appropriateness of methods are central; 4. Spaces for dialogue and children's reflection about their role are fundamental.

Conclusion

All researchers gain consent from institutional ethics committees as a prerequisite to conduct research with children, but it can seem like a tick boxing exercise that is influenced by the cultural contexts and their relevance

of relating to ethical issues (Flewitt 2022). Researchers must be aware of children's verbal or nonverbal expression of consent, assent and dissent and acknowledge these in a research context irrespective of a gate keeper's informed consent to their participation. A child should feel confident and supported to express their dissent to participate in research. Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry's (2012, p.252) assertion that 'dissent is binding' needs to be championed by all gatekeepers who have a child's genuine interest at heart. Researchers must make genuine efforts to ensure that children are provided with opportunities to articulate their choices at any stage in the research process and that these preferences are respected. Meaningful participation from the child is not achieved by tokenistic consent from the adult.

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