

Doing Research With Children: Making Choices on Ethics and Methodology That Encourage Children's Participation

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The aim of this paper is to discuss examples of ethical and methodological choices that respect children's rights to participation by encouraging them to be actively involved in the data generation process. The paper introduces the boxes, a model for confidentially obtaining ongoing and informed consent. It also discusses the use of cultural artifacts, chosen by the children themselves, to communicate with the researcher during the interview process. This paper concludes by emphasizing the need to design and cocreate open, flexible approaches in research that encourage children to obtain control and ownership of the research process.

Key words: research with children; research ethics; informed consent; methodology; children's participation

This paper sits in the broader context of doing research with children and relates to issues of children's participation in research and the importance of respecting children's rights. Children's participation and active involvement in research have been extensively discussed and debated by authors in the childhood studies field. It is argued that children should be able to contribute to the decision-making process (Powell & Smith, 2009) and that researchers should value children's roles in research (Scheffel, 2009) and research for and with children (Gallacher, Gallagher, & Keynes, 2008). This paper contributes to these debates by describing how children were encouraged to be actively involved in the data generation process in an ethnographic research project that aimed to identify different perspectives on creativity in Scottish primary¹ education. This paper also relates to debates on ways of doing research with children, in terms of both ethical challenges and methodological choices, as mentioned below.

The main aim of this paper is to show how children were invited to participate in shaping the research process in the areas of both ethics and methodology. To pursue this aim, I begin the paper by providing an overview of conflicting arguments on children's participation in research. I then present the research context that encouraged children's active involvement in research. The first section discusses the findings on the use of the boxes system for obtaining informed and ongoing consent (a process whereby children could repeatedly select a "yes" or "no" option on a piece of paper and put this paper in a plastic box, indicating their preference to opt in or opt out of the research at any time). The second section discusses the rationale that led to the design of the interview process and elaborates on its implementation in practice.

Children's rights and children's participation in research

Traditional practices in childhood studies saw children as "less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete" (Jenks, 2005, p. 19) and thus did not involve children in the decision-making process of the research (Kellett, 2010). In such practices, children were represented by adults, who were responsible for interpreting children's lives and views (Christensen & James, 2000). Nowadays, there are approaches that recognize children as human "beings" rather than human "becomings" (Qvortrup, 1994), and children's rights have been officially recognized

by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Recent approaches view children as active social agents (James, 2010) and as rights holders (Farrell, Kagan, & Tisdall, 2016) and recognize the “plurality, complexity, multiplicity and the diversities of childhood” (James, 2010, pp. 487–488). Thus, children are seen as subjects and not as objects of research processes (Christensen & James, 2000). It is also argued that children should be informed and contribute to the dialogue about important decisions throughout the research process (Christensen, 2004; Powell & Smith, 2009).

Following the new tensions surrounding research within childhood studies that suggest that researchers should research for and with children (Gallacher et al., 2008), children’s participation in research has been given considerable attention by many scholars (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2010; Powell & Smith, 2009) and is described by many and diverse definitions (Tisdall, 2016). Key aspects of these definitions promote the encouragement of children’s active involvement in the research process, with attention paid to valuing children’s voices, views, and experiences (Moss, Clark, & Kjorholt, 2005; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Researchers have used various approaches to encourage children’s participation, some arguing that children can be engaged as researchers themselves (Gallacher et al., 2008). For example, Kellett (2010) carried out child-led research in which children were involved in the stages of designing and carrying out research and disseminating the findings.

On the other hand, participatory approaches have been discussed critically by researchers. For example, Gallagher (2009c) points out the danger for children in being seen as powerless while adults, as power holders, share some power with them through participatory approaches. By criticizing arguments that view participation as driven by power, Gallagher (2009c) prompts us to view power from a Foucauldian perspective as a dynamic, productive, ambivalent notion, and also to pay attention to the power dynamics among children themselves. Furthermore, as Tisdall (2012, p. 187) highlights in a similar vein, “there is a risk that children are treated as a homogeneous group, with a too-simplified dichotomy of childhood versus adulthood,” which does not prompt us to take into account the diversities of childhood. Other criticisms involve concerns such as the possibility that children may not want to participate actively (Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and also that children may choose more silent ways of being involved, which are viewed as alternatives to participation by the children (Gallacher et al., 2008). Finally, it is argued that there is a danger of uncritical use of participatory methods which claim to be emancipatory but which, in reality, promote adults’ ideas, agendas, and strategies (Gallacher et al., 2008; Kim, 2016).

The aforementioned debates demonstrate the complexity of doing research with children and raise the following question for this paper: How can we create a research context wherein children can choose the level at which and the way in which they want to participate in research processes?

Research focus and methodology

This paper draws on my ethnographic study that explored children’s perspectives on creativity within a Scottish primary school classroom and consisted of 25 children (aged 11–12), and two teachers. The data generation process for this research involved participant observation (4 months, 3–4 days per week for 3–6 hours per day) and interviews with children and teachers.

In terms of ethics, every effort was made to respect children’s right to confidentiality and to guarantee their anonymity. This research followed the ERIC ethical guidelines (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013), an approach that pays particular attention to children’s human rights (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015). As argued by Graham and Fitzgerald (2010), recognizing children’s human rights when doing research with children means that “participation is more than just a powerful interest and envisages that children have rights to be listened to and their views taken into account” (p. 135). More specifically, from a human rights perspective, the

ERIC ethical guidelines highlight the need to develop an ethical research strategy, one that acknowledges children's right to be properly researched along with the basic human rights principles of dignity and respect, as well as the children's rights to protection and to participation (Graham et al., 2013).

This paper analyzes the use of ethical and methodological choices that aimed to provide children with flexibility on the level at which and the way in which they wanted to participate in research processes. Having addressed the focus of this article, I am now going to discuss how it was applied to my ethnographic research project with 11- to 12-year-old children.

The use of the boxes for negotiating informed consent

Obtaining informed consent has been viewed as an important part of doing research with children (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones, & Milne, 2010). For this research, I followed Gallagher's (2009b, p. 15) definition of informed consent, which specifies that "consent involves some explicit act" (in this research it involved a written signature), "participants can only consent if they are informed about, and understand, something of the nature, purpose and likely consequences of the research," "consent must be given voluntarily, without coercion," and "consent must be renegotiable." Similarly, Davis (1998) categorizes ethics in research with children into three groups: informed consent, confidentiality, and protection. Yet, he argues that ethics and participation are a process, not a one-off moment.

Following Davis's (1998) argument, that is, viewing ethics as a process that includes children in every stage of the research, I became aware of a paradox (see also Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2016): namely, that children were the main participants in this research, but the last to be asked to provide their consent. This fact indicates children's unequal position (in the sense that it depends on the outcome of the previous decision layers) within the structures of procedural ethics (Gillam & Guillemin, 2004). Additionally, this paradox raises an important question as to whether ethics mainly protect adults or are used as a procedure to enable children's participation (Davis et al., 2011). Similar concerns are raised by Iannacci (2015), who reflects on the dynamics of negotiating entrance to a research site. In his case, unequal power dynamics between the advisory committee and the researcher raised barriers to the acquisition of consent to conduct research, so that in the end, the study never happened.

After gaining ethical approval from the university's ethics committee, I then negotiated access with the head teacher and the teacher at the school before negotiating access with all the parents by distributing leaflets and consent forms. When I first entered the field, I had a discussion with the children about my research, their right to choose whether they would like to participate, and other ethical issues. Being influenced by literature that suggests that informed consent needs to be a reflexive, ongoing, and renegotiable process (Gallagher, 2009a; Hammersley, 2015), and by arguments supporting the idea that researchers should reflect on the power dynamics in the field (Gallacher et al., 2008), I decided to develop a system that would enable children to renegotiate their consent, opting in and out at any time.

Such systems have also been developed by other researchers. For example, Gallagher (2004) used coloured stickers that children could stick on their clothes, indicating whether or not they would like to take part in the research. Children made much use of the stickers, but this usage served various purposes that were not linked to the researcher's aim, which was to use the stickers as a means of renegotiating consent. Instead, children were playing with the stickers, sticking them on different objects, and also using them as status symbols. Therefore, Gallagher argued that "the stickers did not enable children to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the research or not" (p. 86). Kustatscher (2015) introduced a new visual system that children could use for renegotiating consent. Using a magnetic board, children could move their pictures to the opt-in and opt-out parts.

The use of the magnets enabled children to engage with the process of informed consent and was particularly useful for visualizing power dynamics and relationships between children and the researcher while creating space for discussion around such issues. On the other hand, children's decisions to opt in and out were "publicly visible and debated" (Kustatscher, 2014, p. 692), and this "brought some inherent power differences to the fore" (p. 694).

Reading about these techniques, I felt the need to develop a system that would not only promote ongoing consent, but also respect children's right to confidentiality in the sense that their decisions to opt in or out would not be based on their friends' choices or on attempts to portray to others that they were participating in the research, even if they didn't want to. For these purposes, I introduced the system of the boxes.

During the first day of my visit to the school I introduced the idea of the boxes to the children. I used two plastic boxes of the same size but of different colours, one empty (pink colour) and one full of small, square papers that included a "yes" and "no" option, as well as a space for the children to write their names in (that box was blue). The idea was that children would grab one piece of paper from the blue box, select the "yes" or "no" option, write down their name, and then put this paper in the pink box, in that way informing me of their choices without letting anyone else know about them. In my next visit to the school the children informed me of their decision to put the boxes in a space of their own choice in the classroom. This space was in the back-middle of the classroom and was visible from most angles, which allowed me to check the boxes not long after a message was put into the pink box.

The system of the boxes was discussed between me and the participants and everyone agreed that it was an option that children could use for renegotiating consent. Although I regularly reminded the children of this option, I didn't try to make the process obligatory. So, children had flexibility as to how they wanted to inform me about their ongoing consent. During the time I spent in the field, I realized that children had created their own understandings of how to use the boxes. I also became aware of factors that influenced their decisions to opt in or out of the research. Some of these examples are described below.

The idea of using the boxes was not always clear to the children. Sometimes, children were trying to understand why they should use the boxes and for what purposes, as in the example below:

Isa (a pseudonym—all the names are pseudonyms): Can I ask you about the boxes?

Krystallia: Of course you can!

Isa: How often do we have to write yes or no? Every day?

Krystallia: Anytime you feel you want to change your option. You don't have to do that, only if you want to.

Isa: Can we also write yes?

Krystallia: I know that you have said yes in the beginning, but if you want to indicate this again, then, you can.

Isa: I am asking that because I want to talk to you. (She tries to find a way to grab my attention "officially.")

Krystallia: Then, you can either put a message in the box or talk to me. However you feel like.

Isa: (She didn't write anything, she just started talking to me). We want to help you with your work!

(Excerpt from field notes, 30 April 2015)

On a similar occasion, Calum told me that he didn't think it was necessary to have boxes, as the children had already said yes to me at the beginning by completing the consent forms (excerpt from field notes, 27 April 2015), which indicates that ethical procedures and procedural ethics are not always helpful and meaningful for the children.

The boxes were also perceived as a method that provided confidentiality and gave the children some degree of choice. On one occasion, Calum mentioned that he liked the boxes, because "it is like saying to people help yourself and they can do it if they want and when they want" (excerpt from field notes, 30 April 2015). In a similar vein, Gillean said that she liked the system of the boxes because children could choose what they wanted to do in terms of their participation in research. For some children, the use of the boxes was very important because of the confidentiality it provided. As Laura mentioned, the boxes system "was a good idea because it's not like you have to put your hand up because it was kind of private to you ... no one will notice" (interview with Laura, 3 June 2015). Confidentiality issues were of high importance to more introverted and shy children, but also to children who preferred to express their choices in indirect ways, as described by Dorothy during the interview process:

I think it is good because it doesn't put people on the spot so much as if you ask the whole class of people. Because I know that even though I am very loud, I can be very nervous if I am put on the spot of something.... It gives us more freedom if we are nervous about doing it, it means we could say no. And we wouldn't feel guilty about it. (Interview with Dorothy, 8 June 2015)

The use of the boxes and of children's decision to participate in the research were also influenced by children's emotions and by the number of their daily school tasks. During the interview process, Arisha mentioned that the idea of the boxes was good because it gave people who were not "in a mood" the chance to decide not to take part. She also mentioned the positive impact of the opt-in/opt-out process, arguing that feelings change, so people might need to change their decision on that basis. Furthermore, for some children, taking part in the research was related to school tasks and was a kind of additional task. During our discussion in the classroom, Jonathan observed: "I think it is nice [the boxes system], because we can say no if we are very busy." Alastair also mentioned that if he had a day off he would probably use the boxes to say no, which also showed that participation in the research was perceived by some children as another school-related task.

Overall, the use of the boxes generated various understandings of what research participation meant to the children. For example, research participation was perceived by some as a fluid process, in which the children themselves could actively and flexibly decide when to participate by using the opt-in and opt-out system, and by others as another school-related task that needed to be fitted into the child's daily schedule.

Children's responses enable us to conclude that the boxes system provided flexibility in its use and space for children to actively make decisions about ongoing consent and research participation. Research in the childhood studies field has highlighted the importance of building spaces for dialogue where children and adults are able to discuss solutions (Davis et al., 2011) and where children's active participation in research is valued and enabled (Scheffel, 2009). The use of the boxes system is an example of children's involvement in decision-making processes and of how consent can be implemented as a process in practice. Finally, the use of this system illustrates the way that viewing consent as a fluid process acknowledges and enables children's differing needs in relation to participation in research.

However, very few children actually used the boxes, and this raised a question as to how meaningful the boxes system was, besides a more general question about the degree to which it is possible for researchers to gain truly informed consent.

Children's ability to shape their participation in the research process was also encouraged during the interview process, as discussed in the following section.

How children's decisions shaped the interview process

Before conducting the interviews, I informed the children about the voluntary character of the interview process and about their right to end our discussion at any point. We then had a discussion in the classroom during which more details of the interview process were clarified. The children were also aware that the interviews would be recorded; consent for this was sought from children, parents/caregivers, the teacher, and the school. A flexible interview process was created using a semistructured approach (Mukherji, 2015). Also, following the suggestion that researchers should conduct the interviews in a "comfortable, quiet, private space that has positive associations with the children" (Gallagher, 2009a, p. 75), I encouraged children to choose the space that they preferred as the site of our discussion.

Children's participation is seen as a significant aspect of doing research with children (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015). Other work in the childhood studies field has proposed and used a variety of methods for doing research with children, such as the use of photographs, diaries, and drawings (Backett & Alexander, 1991; Barker & Weller, 2003), persona dolls (Konstantoni, 2011), puppets (Cameron, 2005), and so on. However, such studies have been critiqued on the grounds that not all children are interested in using specific methods to express their meanings (Tisdall, 2016).

In an attempt to consider children's individual choices, I encouraged children to actively contribute to the research process by bringing with them cultural artifacts or other prompts that were related to our discussion. This practice sought to involve children in the research process by enabling them to decide how they would prefer to communicate their messages to me. The links that children made were not only practical ones, such as artifacts and prompts that they brought with them, but also more abstract ones, such as ideas and thoughts; however, all these modes had the common characteristic of being linked to children's experiences and social spheres.

The aim of this ethnographic research was to explore the children's and the teacher's perspectives on creativity within one primary school classroom in Scotland, exploring how creativity is perceived and can be fostered in this classroom. Gaps that I identified in the literature highlighted a lack of research that examined children's own views on creativity or obtained a greater understanding of classroom life in relation to creativity. Therefore, the focus of the interviews was to understand children's views on creativity, as well as to explore the ways that creativity was implemented in practice in their classroom. An example of negotiation surrounding the process of children using artifacts for communicating their meanings is offered below.

Isa was very happy to be interviewed. We were walking down the stairs, moving towards the sofas—the location that she chose for the interview. She was explaining to me that most children preferred the sofas for our discussion, because this is a space that makes them feel calm and comfortable and, moreover, is a space to which children are not allowed access on a normal school day. Then, I asked her if she wanted to bring any activities or other prompts with her.

Isa: What kind of things can I bring?

Krystallia: Anything you feel like it is related to creativity for you. This could be an activity or anything else from the classroom.

Isa: Has anyone else brought anything?

Krystallia: Not yet. They preferred to explain to me. It is not obligatory to bring something; only if you want.

Isa: Okay, I will explain to you then. Because I don't want to talk to you about any specific activity, I mostly prefer things that we do outside.

(Excerpt from field-notes, 3 June 2015)

In the above-mentioned example, although Isa did not actually bring any artifacts with her, she explained the necessary factors in defining something as creative. On other, similar, occasions when children preferred to share their views without bringing any artifacts, creativity was linked to outdoor play, collaboration with younger children, and the process of learning together, improvisation of individual work, and so on. On the other hand, children who brought cultural artifacts and prompts with them usually chose to bring projects that they had worked on; they defined creativity by explaining to me the process of pursuing this particular activity, the general context, and their feelings. One of the main findings of this ethnography was that creativity can be perceived differently by different people, so that the production of a single definition may restrict children's experiences of creativity (Kyritsi, 2018). One can therefore conclude that the flexibility that underpinned the design of the interview process enabled children both to shape the way they participated in research and to express multiple and diverse views on what creativity is and how we can best promote it in the primary classroom.

Additionally, during the interview process, I adopted the role of reflective listener and learner (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and children were also encouraged to pose questions to me, following Christensen's (2004) suggestion of shifting the traditional roles in the interview process. This decision strengthened children's active involvement in the research process and also provided me with the opportunity to see what topics interest children and their links to creativity. This approach also enabled me as a researcher to create a flexible research practice and a space in which children could express their perspectives on what creativity meant to them, without being influenced by my ideas. As children sometimes try to please the interviewer (Mayall, 1994), I tried to make clear to them that there are many different perspectives on creativity, so there is not a right or wrong way of thinking about it. By contrast, if I had chosen to use specific research techniques, such as creative methods of interviewing, children might have associated those methods (e.g., writing, photographs, drawings) with what creativity should be. Thus, creating a more open and flexible interview process enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of children's views. For example, children were encouraged to reflect on questions related to what creativity is for them, and were asked to give examples of creativity's practical implementation. In turn, the children asked me questions about the nature of schools in Greece, where I am from, including the disciplinary mechanisms and adults' power over children in that context. Listening to their questions about Greek schools was also a valuable learning experience for me, giving me insight into what subjects mattered to them the most.

This section discussed children's participation during the interview process. It argued that the flexible design of the process encouraged children to participate actively by using prompts linked to their own collective and individual social worlds, rather than following structured guidelines preset by the researcher (see also Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2000). The interview process was an exploratory one in which the researcher and the participants learnt from each other. This flexible process enabled children to feel more comfortable about sharing

their views with the researcher and thus avoided unintentional silencing caused by unacknowledged power within the interviewer-interviewee relationship, as has been noticed by other researchers (see Scheffel, 2009). Another key aspect that emerged in this section was related to children's broad understanding of the notion of prompts/artifacts, which was not necessarily restricted to objects but could also apply to spaces and emotions. These conclusions further link with findings of my research on creativity, showing that children's feelings, interactions, and space were interconnected and influenced their experiences of creativity (Kyritsi, 2018). Considering the above, one can notice that discussions on doing research with children can influence but also be influenced by discussions in the field of creativity regarding the importance of paying attention to a plethora of parameters that include, but are not limited to, feelings, interactions, space, and materials.

The main conclusion of this section affirms the importance of creating less strict and more flexible research practices that provide the space for children to contribute in ways they feel comfortable with. As we saw above, children could choose the space, the materials, and the way in which they wanted to express their views. Children's ability to be involved in coconstructive approaches to research participation and to find the preferred balance between freedom and structure are at the core of my overall research findings on what creativity meant for the children (Kyritsi, 2018). These links enable us to conclude that viewing research participation as a flexible process means that children can actively shape parts of the research practices depending on their needs. It also means that the focus of the research can influence the way children participate in it.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed choices on ethics and methodology that encouraged children to actively participate in the research process, specifically, during the stage of obtaining ongoing informed consent and during the interview process.

The paper introduced the boxes system, which was used for ongoing, renegotiable consent and enabled consent to be enacted as a process; it provided children with flexibility in terms of how and how often to use it and it kept their responses confidential. Additionally, the interview process was based on the use of prompts/artifacts linked to children's social worlds, which encouraged them to express their own meanings of creativity in their own ways and to decide how they would prefer to communicate these meanings to me. Both stages (that is, the consent and interview processes) invited children to take part in shaping the research process, which enabled their differing needs for participation in research to be realized and enacted.

The contribution of this paper lies in its presentation of how children's participation occurred in my study, with a particular focus on the creation of flexible research processes through all the research stages. In a broader sense, the concept of flexibility that was applied to research methods in this paper was very much linked to my research findings on creativity, which indicate the importance of balancing freedom and structure within an environment where children can develop their own understandings of what creativity is and how we can best promote it in the primary classroom (Kyritsi, 2018). Therefore, the focus of the research and the ethical and methodological processes influenced each other in creating a flexible, exploratory process that aimed to enable children's active participation.

Overall, this paper analyzed a case of encouraging children's active involvement in research during an ethnographic research project. Its key argument was that creating a flexible research design enabled children both to shape the way they participated in research according to their preferences and to express their views on creativity in the way they found most efficient, without being influenced by the researcher's views and expectations.

This paper invites reflections on building spaces of dialogue in which children and adults can discuss how best to explore different research topics. Every research setting is different and there may be numerous ways to develop research practices that respect children's rights of participation. However, as suggested by Davis and colleagues (2011), "we should not assume that any other approach will work best or can be parachuted in (e.g., from another country)" (p. 127). Therefore, this paper wishes to open up space for dialogue on how we as researchers can build practices that acknowledge the complexity of researching with children and draw on this complexity to find means of fostering children's participation in research in ways that the children themselves find comfortable, preferable, and appropriate.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Primary school in Scotland lasts for seven years. Children start primary school when they are aged between four-and-a-half and five-and-a-half years old. All Scottish primary schools follow the Curriculum for Excellence, a national curriculum that was implemented in 2010 and is used from nursery to secondary school (from age 3 to 18).