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Working Group 5 Report
DigiLitEY Research Methods Think Tank

Date: 7-8 February 2019
Venue: La Corrala Cultural Center, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid

Executive summary

This document reports the main discussion points arising from a two-day *DigiLitEY* COST Action Think Tank, where we invited leading researchers from across Europe who are specialists in young children's digital literacies. The aim was to share and debate perspectives in relation to current and future research challenges in this field of research. The discussion was held under three themes: 1) 'Methodological Challenges, Flexibility and Innovation'; 2) 'Public Engagement / Transference'; and 3) 'Inclusiveness.' The group agreed to produce a collective publication based on the discussion held during the Think Tank, and this report closes with an outline of the planned publication.

Keywords

Research Methodology; Early Childhood; New Technology; Digital Practices; Digital Literacies; Inclusiveness; Transference / Impact.

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Introduction

David Poveda (UAM) and Rosie Flewitt (IoE-UCL) called for the Think Tank as part of the activities of COST Action DigiLitEY (IS1410) Working Group 5 (WG5), which they coordinate. Funded by European Cooperation in Science and Technology, the Action aims to develop a network of researchers focused on the digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children (aged 0-8) (see http://digilitey.eu/ and https://digilitey.wordpress.com/). WG5 in particular centres on methodological and ethical issues related to this field of research (see WG5 objectives and achievements http://digilitey.eu/working-groups/wg5-methodologies/).

The Think Tank brought together leading researchers in the area of young children's digital literacies and practices to share their experiences and perspectives in relation to current and future research challenges in this field. The meeting took place 7-8 February 2019 (half-day on the afternoon of the 7th and a full day on the 8th) at La Corrala Cultural Center, a meeting and work space of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid located in downtown Madrid. The specific objectives of the event were:

1) To map and critically discuss the range of methodological approaches and traditions that are currently shaping research on the digital literacies and practices of young children.
(2) To discuss how these approaches respond to central issues in the current/future research agenda in relation to children and digital media/technologies.
(3) To discuss how research in this field connects with education policy, and pedagogic practices in schools, homes and communities.

Eight EU-based researchers were invited to attend the Think Tank, which was organised by the WG5 co-chairs and Mitsuko Matsumoto. The event was also open to a local academic participant and a selected group of local graduate students/emergent researchers who joined in the discussions. The Think Tank therefore offered an opportunity for post-graduate students and Early Career Researchers to participate in international research consultation and agenda setting, while maximising value-for-money.

Participants			
Academic participants		Local student participants	
1	Cristina Aliagas (Spain - Barcelona)	12	Nieves Galera
2	Asta Cekaite (Sweden)	13	Mar Gil
4	Kate Cowan (UK)	14	Paula Gómez
5	Rosie Flewitt (UK) - Organizer	15	Daniela Martínez

6	Ana Jorge (Portugal)	16	Paloma Elvira
7	Stavourla Kontovourki (Cyprus)		
8	Giovanna Mascheroni (Italy)		
9	David Poveda (Spain, local organizer)		
10	Mitsuko Matsumoto (Spain, local organizer)		
11	Marta Morgade (Spain, local participant)		

During the first day of the Think Tank, each participant presented an overview of their research and methodologies, and the second day was dedicated to interrogating the three key themes/questions: 1) 'Methodological Challenges, Flexibility and Innovation'; 2) 'Public Engagement / Transference', and; 3) 'Inclusiveness' (See Appendix for all the questions under each theme posed during the meeting). The final session was dedicated to discussing key outcomes, including the production of this report as well as a collective publication stemming from the meeting. All the sessions were audio-recorded. In this report, we focus on presenting the main discussion points regarding the key themes, and we conclude by sharing an outline of the collective publication we have agreed to produce.

Theme 1: 'Methodological Challenges, Flexibility and Innovation'

We discussed the advantages of using new research tools (e.g. wearable cameras, GRP sensors, drone, etc.) and the practical and ethical challenges entailed in their use. These

technologies push disciplines outside their traditional boundaries - they shift the focus from spoken and written voices to multimodal voices, but these changes require additional theorization and critical reflection. For example, Kate Cowan shared her experience of equipping children with wearable cameras in one of the projects she is involved in. Wearable cameras enable researchers to capture the movements of the participant (e.g. stamping of feet) and relate these to the sounds of movements. The camera also captures the shadow of the participants. Thus, they offer a more multisensory, embodied perspective. However, if worn on the chest rather than the head (which is less comfortable), wearable cameras do not catch the focal child's facial expression, or head movement. Their use also raises ethical challenges, and require enhanced consent from children, who often forget that they are wearing a recording device and they may say or do things that they do not want to be recorded. It is therefore vital to double-check with participants *both before and after data collection* if data can be used for research purposes.

One key advantage that mobile digital and visual technology brings to the research site is that it moves the focus of research from 'voice' in the traditional sense - a reliance on verbal/oral/written expression - to 'multimodal voice.' This move has implications for how participants can present themselves and how researchers can scrutinize data and present study findings. The richness of digital and visual data also constitutes a significant challenge, with regard to how to log and analyse large, complex and multimodal data sets. One strategy is to review the entire data set to identify themes, and then develop selection criteria to home in on small data segments and analyse these in detail (Cowan). The researcher must also be attentive to the way in which multimodal approaches tend to split things out in the process of analysis. An alternative approach is offered by sensorial ethnography, as proposed by Pink, who takes a holistic approach towards participants' lives (see Special Issue in Qualitative Research "Multimodality and ethnography: working at the intersection," 2011, edited by Dicks et al. for discussions regarding tensions between multimodal and sensory ethnography) (Flewitt).

At the same time, we should be aware of the limitations and disadvantages of bringing technological tools to research. For example, Asta Cekaite raised the point that we should be cautious that wearable cameras do not totally represent participants' perspectives, particularly given the limitations of such cameras mentioned above. It is important to acknowledge that wearable technologies offer the perspective of the camera, and not the participant. Therefore, as with any tool - whether digital or not - we should be aware of the limitations of each research device, and combine different methods to approach the participants' points of view (Kontovourki).

Rosie Flewitt and Stavourla Kontovourki also raised the importance of being aware of the impact of bringing technology to a research setting: both to the researchers and to the participants. Rosie Flewitt commented that by bringing technical equipment into the research field, the researcher may not concentrate fully on observing and/or engaging with participants, as the equipment also demands the researcher's attention. Stavourla Kontovourki, in turn, shared her research experience when recording equipment impacted

the participants' attitudes in a classroom environment. When she recorded video holding a camera herself (as she did not have a tripod) it became more obvious what and who she was recording, particularly when she turned the camera lens towards participants. As she sensed that the equipment affected participants' behaviours, she decided to hold the camera always in the same direction, even when her attention was beyond the camera's scope.

Towards participatory research

The importance of including participants in the research process was recognised. On one hand, technologies are increasingly user friendly, and help researchers to involve participants in the research process, such as delegating some of the data collection to them (Poveda). For instance, Plowman (2016) asked parents to take photos of children's activities at certain times of day using their own mobile phones and send them to researchers. Also some social media provide potentials for increasing participation (Kontovourki). However, there are ethical issues around the commercial nature of the most widely used social media platforms, and password-protected or open access platforms created by researchers for researchers are preferable to avoid ethical issues associated with commercial sites (Mascheroni) - see more in the Section Discussion on 'big data' below.

Participant perspectives were considered essential, as there can be wide divergences between what a researcher thinks is going on in the field when studying the recorded data, and what participants think was happening (Flewitt, Mascheroni and Cowan). Involving participants in the process of analysis therefore also yields crucial insights into factors that are important from participants' perspectives (Cekaite).

Digital technologies alongside established approaches in research

Although the group was open to using new technological tools in research, mention was also made of the importance of valuing established, traditional methods (taking field notes, for instance) (Kontovourki). The fundamental issue is researching human experience, and critical reflection is needed regarding how research is reduced or enhanced through digital technologies (Flewitt). Therefore, bringing in the most advantaged technological tools does not in itself result in better research, and nor can technology guarantee participation – as pointed out by Ana Jorge, technology can also be seen as pushing research towards surveillance and inequality.

Using complex technological tools and visual methodologies may not be feasible for those who are interested in conducting research that is close to practice, such as teachers in early childhood education. However, simple technological tools do have potential for them to get involved in the research process and help them reflect on and improve their practice. For instance, basic video recording of their teaching could help them deepen self-awareness in their own teaching practices as well as enhance teachers' understanding of

children, and potentially improving their ways of communicating with children (Cekaite). Analysing digitally recorded data can highlight certain behaviours and help to shift teachers' attention to different aspects of children's play or learning, in turn raising awareness of important details that may otherwise be 'glossed over', or not considered important (Cowan). Although no firm conclusions were reached, time was dedicated to discussing how teachers could have more voice in research and how this could open up new spaces for discussion about teaching and learning.

Discussion on this theme concluded by recognising the limitations of research, regardless of whatever technological tools are employed. The reality we try to document is more complex than how we document, and although we try to find 'better' or new ways, the world is always more complex than what research data shows (Poveda). Furthermore, the more information we try to capture, for example with five cameras, the more complex and time-consuming data analysis becomes. We need to be humble, and to acknowledge that we cannot access or capture everything, and as researchers we need to think about how much time we have to analyse, and evaluate what we really need and what is 'good enough' as we tend to collect more than we need (Cekaite; see also Sarangi, 2019, on ethics of qualitative interpretation and analytical procedures to work with complex data).

When we have large and complex data, the temptation is to code everything, thus de-contextualising the data. However, as we cannot capture everything, the findings are always based on the situation and context (Flewitt). We should remember and accept that research is a situated practice, which implies a shift from the previous positivistic logic (Aliagas). This also suggests there is a policy-practice gap, as we cannot provide simple solutions that would work in all situations, as policymakers often would like to hear from researchers (Flewitt).

Theme 2: 'Public Engagement'

For discussion on the topic of public engagement, we divided into three groups, with each group focusing on different stakeholders: 1) 'Policymakers and industry' led by Mascheroni ; 2) 'Mass media' led by Jorge; and 3) 'Family and school' led by Kontovourki.

1) 1) 'Policymakers and industry'

The group discussed how challenging it is to communicate results from qualitative research to policymakers and industry in ways that are understandable to them. Statistical data is more self-evident. However, the problem with statistical data is that they reinforce stereotypes, including fears around children's use of digital media. Therefore, the group reconfirmed our specific responsibilities as qualitative researchers: to show the complexity and diversity of childhood and children's' experiences. This is something qualitative data can do, complementing quantitative data, which can mask complexity and diversity, by nature of the data gathered and analytic processes. Examples were shared of formats that

help to make findings accessible to non-academics, such as blog posts and ways to represent findings visually.

Ethical issues dealing with industry were another topic of discussion, as this relationship can be problematic on both sides. On one hand, there is the risk that industry may be motivated to exploit research findings for commercial and financial gain, rather than for children's benefit. On the other hand, researchers may be unsure regarding how to deal with data from digital industries, if we have access to information, such as 'Big Data' (see more discussion in the section below Discussion on 'Big Data'). These are highly sensitive data as they could be de-anonymised and re-identified. Other problems also arise as reducing children's lives to 'data' over-simplifies the reality of their lives, which can lead to erroneous or misguided findings, for example, by making simple correlations between data on screen viewing time and children's wellbeing and cognitive development. Policymakers and parents need to know how to make sense of research findings, and to understand why there are sometimes different and seemingly contradictory findings from different studies. The group therefore reaffirmed qualitative researchers' responsibility to raise awareness about the kinds of stereotypes and bias that may lie hidden in quantitative data, especially in big data, as well as countering public myths about digital practices.

2) 'Mass Media'

The group recognised that the field of Mass Media consists of multiple stakeholders and agencies and that there are complex interactions across and among them. Researchers are just one of the stakeholders, not superior or better than others and we need to provide support to other agents. One agent that tends to be overlooked is civic societies, and it is important to reflect on how we as researchers can engage with activists to advocate for children's rights, etc. and find more effective ways to engage with media. It is important to engage with different voices in society to add diversity to public debate.

The group felt there is a tendency for researchers to think primarily about news media, neglecting other types of media, such as entertainment, advertisement, and fiction, when we think about communicating research. However, different types of media contribute to the creation of the imaginary of families and children and their relations towards technology. Advertising promotes images and imaginaries about technologies and children. Cultural attitudes towards childhood and child behaviour also shape how children interact with technology in different social contexts, such as on aeroplanes or in restaurants – that is, how young children should behave in these spaces.

There are conflicts that emerge from the interaction between the different logics of the media and the logic of research. To some extent, some simplification is expected, but could be used for 'fake news'. The research community must consider how misinterpretations and over-simplifications of research can be avoided and/or fought against - how we can create counter-arguments or counter-discourses, especially to the simplistic arguments that media sometimes use to refer to children's digital practices as harmful. One possibility is to engage in ongoing discussion with agencies and stakeholders, including media, not to confront them but to build relationships with them, and try to become reliable reference points for them in key societal debates. The direct involvement of researchers in news and media content is increasingly common, such as by writing columns, interviews via radio and TV broadcasts, blogs and vlogs, and through providing public releases of research information. These public-facing strategies are essential but researchers also need to be aware of how news organisations and social media work in order to get the attention of an audience. We should avoid 'inoculation' discourses and simplistic 'cure-all' solutions that media may prefer, and provide better informed, yet clear counter-discourses. It is important to include different kinds of childhoods in media coverage - if we manage to bring the experiences of excluded groups to media, we can make those realities more visible.

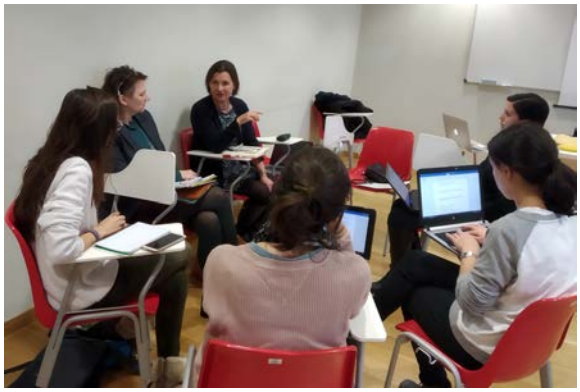
The discussion also extended to methodological approaches preferred by media. We are aware that more qualitative data should be included alongside quantitative data, but qualitative data can pose challenges when we approach media, as the identities of individual participants cannot be disclosed. However, we can bring attention to particular experiences, and case studies can be attractive for the press when they are understood as "stories."

3) 'Family and School'

The group discussed how to increase the relevance of research for families and schools, with diverse ideas drawn from the group members' experience. These include creating an advisory board with different stakeholders (Flewitt) and working with teachers and families to create something tangible, such as an ebook or an interactive website (Cekaite). The group recognised the importance of incorporating tangible ways to involve teachers and family members from the very first stages of research planning.

The group recognised that parents and teachers tend to be more influenced by quantitative and comparative approaches, and 'evidence' tends to be conceptualised in a certain way. Parents, teachers and policymakers also tend to seek simple advice or a simple solution, when in reality there is more than one solutions. Discussion at this point focused on ways to convey complexity in 'digestible' ways. For instance, when parents ask for advice during the research process, which often occurs, rather than feeling obliged to

give them an answer, a better approach may be to create a space for conversation, understanding why they are asking for such advice, and helping them reflect themselves and reach their own conclusions that fit the reality of their own and their families' lives.



The group also discussed how to tackle the 'myths' and panic discourse around children's digital practices. One way is to deconstruct assumptions by providing contrasting examples, such as reading a book 'in isolation' and gaming in groups (socialisation), and to clarify how similar discourses have prevailed every time different media devices and means have been introduced in history, not only radio, TV and telephone, but also even writing and novels were thought of as threats to the social order when they emerged in earlier times of human history.

Theme 3: 'Inclusiveness'

This whole group discussion began with sharing experiences in researching with children and young people outside the mainstream - such as working with young people with cancer or in recovery (Jorge), children living with profound economic and social disadvantage, refugee children (Flewitt), children with special needs and in special education centres (Mascheroni / Flewitt), and the benefits of technologies for these children, particularly touch-screen tablets, which can enable communication and offer new, highly accessible formats for educational activities.

The discussion also included the potential of tablets, or more specifically iPads to enable people with special needs. Instead of or alongside special equipment - which tends to be extremely expensive and to be individually created for each child's specific requirements - iPads offer a more universally accessible option. They can also be used to promote sociable behaviours - children sitting around a table with an iPad can create conversation and interaction with children that have other capacities. There is a danger in designing special tools for children with disabilities as in a way this can constrain them - designing for expectations of what children will be able to do rather than enable children to have access to universal resources where they may show greater capacity than they had previously been given credit for. There is an argument for using affordable and universal technologies alongside specialized equipment, and for recognising both the advantages and limitations of each.

Some specific examples shared among the group of inclusive and sensitive approaches to different childhoods, with particular reference to children with functional diversities, included:

- Meryl Alper's work with children and young people with autism and other disabilities. She applies intersectionality to children with disabilities and different social conditions (Alper et al; 2016) and also proposes 'inclusive sensory ethnography' (Alper, 2018) to account for greater neurodiversity in how humans process sensory input as well as a fuller range of multi-sensory encounters with new media.
- Eva Eriksson "Plan&Do" (e.g. Eriksson et al., 2018): Participatory designs to support children with cognitive functional diversity.
- Seray Ibrahim "Small speaks: designing digital technologies for communication and technologies" (available at: http://www.smallspeaks.com/) is a blog site where she reflects on her PhD research process of involving children with severe speech and physical impairments in the design of communication aid technologies.

We also discussed the issue of the "digital divide" from different angles, such as socio-economic spectrum, geographical locations, and by generation. Below are some references we shared among the group:

- "Social inequalities, childhood and media" (2019) by Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Jasmin Kulterer, and Philip Sinner. The book includes a methodological chapter (pp. 77-106), in which they address ethical issues.
- "Digital inclusion in rural areas: A qualitative exploration of challenges faced by people from isolated communities" (2016) by Teresa Correa and Isabel Pavez.

Regarding digital divide across generations, Asta Cekaite shared the situation of Sweden where the society is becoming extremely digitized (for example, it's difficult to get a ticket if you do not have access to the internet). Children have to learn to be digital citizens and this also affects children as digital translators for parents who may not have proficiency not only in digital matters but also linguistically; children have to be the ones to help their family to do basic things via the internet, as things that might have been easy to do in person before are now mostly dependent on individuals and families' ability to negotiate digital environments.

The discussion ended by recognising the clear need for more research in this area.

Discussion on 'Big Data'

The issue of Big Data recurred throughout this meeting, so we decided to dedicate time to discuss issues related to this topic. Big Data is a term that is increasingly used in social science research to refer to ways of analysing and systematically extracting information from data sets that are too large or complex to be dealt with by traditional data-processing application software. These include, for example, data collated about individuals' behaviour patterns on social media, online shopping preferences etc, and predictive algorithms used in digital media design.

There are many different positions regarding the use of big data. Some people argue that it is a way to democratise data. Others do not agree, as lay people are constrained by restricted access to Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). The first statement is becoming less and less accepted, however, as access to big data is becoming more restricted, particularly after the political controversies associated with Cambridge Analytica, in which the data analytics firm worked with Donald Trump's election team to harvest data on millions of Facebook profiles of US voters, and is also suspected of mobilising the Brexit campaign in the UK. These phenomena has led to service providers being more restrictive in who has access to Big Data for research purposes.

The underlying epistemology of Big Data research has tended to be positivistic: consider these data sources are naturally-occurring and therefore suitable for scrutiny. However, others argue the algorithms that govern social media platforms make data "unnatural" as they are an index of data (Poveda). Furthermore, Big Data is being monetised and access to it is increasingly limited. The group concurred with researchers who are trying to come up with a bottom-up, critical approach to dealing with Big Data (the emergence of Critical Data Studies, for example, see Daly et al; 2019; Couldry and Powell, 2014; van Dick, 2014; Boyd and Crawford, 2012; Hargittai, 2018; Mascheroni, 2018a, 2018b; Foucault Welles, 2016). We also shared new initiatives that seek to protect personal data, such as the HAT Community Organisation (https://www.hatcommunity.org/) that promotes the protection of individual data and the ownership of private data.

We see how Big Data can be useful when we use it to understand children's behaviour. However, we see ethical problems when it is used to monitor them or to predict future use (Aliagas). We also see as problematic how industries can make use of Big Data research for profit (Jorge). It is necessary therefore to reconsider and restate the purpose of research in this digital field (Poveda). We believe that researchers should decide the questions to be asked in a piece of research, not to chase questions imposed by others for the sake of profit (Jorge). We agree that research can be measured in terms of transference and impact, which directs the current research discourse. However, we problematise how it is limited to measurable, direct items, not acknowledging indirect impacts, such as the value of failed experiments and connection to higher quality teaching. This discussion concluded by calling for the need for the impact discourse to encompass evidence of 'change for better'.

Outline of a future collective paper

We have agreed to produce a collective paper, following the model of New London Group (1996). Below are possible titles and content for the paper:

1. Changing ways of being in the world: Changing early childhood literacies
2. Changing ways of knowing the world: Epistemologies and ontologies
    a. Methodological trends (based on Poveda, 2019)
    b. Embodiment, sensorial and multimodal

   c. Big data issue and datafication : a new way of knowing the world
   d. Post-humanism, post-truth and socio-materialism
3. Changing ways of doing research: What are the methodological approaches
   a. Ethnographies (sensorial and embodied, visual, multimodal, digital materialities, embodied, embedded and everyday)
   b. Participatory research (empowerment of child participants)
   c. Inclusive research
   d. Use of technologies and devices as tools for data collection and analysis
   e. Reflexivity in the use of technologies (and being critical to technological advances)
   f. Representing research
4. Changing ways of using research
   a. Impact (reference to the reports by WG 1-4)
   b. Accessibility, relevance and visibility (reach)
   c. Communicating complexity and diversity: how we should try to capture it and communicate
   d. How to engage different stakeholders
5. Moving forward
   a. Continuities and changes
   b. Challenge of old and new ways of doing research
   c. Attitudes of new researcher

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Appendix: Key questions for the discussion

THEME 1: METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES, FLEXIBILITY AND INNOVATION

How do different research methodologies help capture the diversity/changing complexity of young children's engagement with digital media? (e.g. as a multimodal/embodied/sensorial experience, etc.)

How are research methods attuned to the multi-semiotic nature of digital literacies and practices?

How do RM work across the variety of social/institutional settings (families, schools, other organization, etc.)?

THEME 2: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT / TRANSFERENCE

What/How can research become relevant to different stakeholders: families, educators, policy makers, industry, press and media, etc.?

Are there "preferred" methodological approaches? Are there particular "couplings" between RM and audiences that can be problematized?

How can research "dismantle" pervasive public myths/misconstructions? (Use Livingstone (2018) http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2018/10/10/six-myths-about-children-in-the-digital-age/ as a brief introduction to these myths, take a look at them before the meeting if possible)

THEME 3: INCLUSIVENESS

How is research sensitive/inclusive of different "childhoods": developmental needs, social circumstances...?

How can research address social/developmental inequalities?