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Negotiating power dynamics through co-reflexivity in research with young children in disadvantaged communities

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Abstract

This paper addresses how unequal power dynamics in research with young children in disadvantaged communities can be negotiated through co-reflexivity. It explores this through two different projects, the "London Study" and the "Beirut Study", which researched the play of young children from families living with disadvantage in two distinct cultures. First, we highlight similarities between both studies' methodological and ethical approaches that were designed to 'listen' to the children, ensure 'ongoing consent' and co-create knowledge through co-reflexivity. We then draw on data from each study to demonstrate how, in their unique contexts, co-reflexivity was crucial to address researcher–child power dynamics.

KEYWORDS

child–researcher relationships, co-reflexivity, ongoing consent, power dynamics, young children

INTRODUCTION

Conducting research with young children requires the navigation of complex and unequal child-adult power relationships that 'exist in terms of age, status, competency and experience' (Einarsdóttir, 2007, p. 204). A growing body of literature problematises the nature of children's participation in research, arguing that rather than essentialising this process in an unchallenged

manner, critical reflective practice is essential to achieving greater equity in the co-production of research with children (Flewitt & Ang, 2020; Powell et al., 2019). We aim to contribute to this debate by critically reflecting on our own practices and answering the following research question: how might power dynamics between researchers and young children from families living with disadvantage be negotiated through co-reflexivity throughout the research process?

To support our argument, we draw on case studies from two distinct projects conducted respectively in the northern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon, and in London, UK, that explored the play of young children from families living with disadvantage. The "London study" focused on the relationship between 3 and 5-year-old children's free play cultures and practices at home and in nursery settings, and the "Beirut study" focused on the play experiences of 4-8-year-old refugee children in Lebanon following their experiences of armed conflict and displacement from Syria and Iraq.

We begin by reviewing literature to position our paper, conceptualising "power" and "co-reflexivity" in researcher–child relationships and using them as lenses to examine "children's voice" and "provisional consent" in research with young children in disadvantaged communities. We then present an overview of the London and Beirut studies and discuss the parallels and differences between our respective research designs, ethical and methodological approaches, highlighting the value in creating dialogue between these two studies. In the following section we present data extracts and analysis from each project to illustrate core principles around co-reflexivity that might inform future research with young children that seeks to create more equitable power dynamics. The discussion links our shared position on co-reflexivity to literature to highlight the importance of researchers addressing power dynamics in research with young marginalised children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over recent decades there has been a profound shift in the way children are viewed as citizens with rights (e.g., United Nations, 1989), as beings rather than becomings and as agentic meaning makers who can provide unique insights into issues that affect their own lives and experiences (Clark et al., 2014; James et al., 1998). Despite these advancements, scholars have problematised the ways in which children's agency was initially often 'taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic' (Prout, 2011, p. 7) and critiqued these 'mantras' for the 'continuation of colonial imperialism and of introducing ideas antithetical to certain cultures and traditions' (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 250). Examining children's rights globally, John (2003, p. 23) speculates that despite these advancements, 'we are still largely deaf to what [children] have to say and teach us about the world as they see and experience it. We are deafened by dissonance'. She goes on to ask, 'is this inability to listen related to a reluctance to relinquish our view of what children are and, in doing so, to relinquish our own power'? In this paper, we demonstrate how, as researchers, we aimed to empower child participants' diverse expressions of agency in how they represented their lived experiences while maintaining awareness of the dangers of essentialising conventionally accepted discourses of agency. We conceptualise "power" and "co-reflexivity" as the underpinning concepts in researcher–child relationships and use them as lenses to examine our approach to facilitating "provisional consent" and listening to "children's voices".

Our understanding of power dynamics in adult-child negotiations, a central theme in this paper, is underpinned by Foucault's (1978) position that power 'is everywhere'. Rather than being possessed or bestowed upon a select few, Foucault proposes that power is exercised (1982)

and suggests envisioning power in plural form where different actors exercise power in different ways. It is therefore important to consider the interpersonal, social and cultural contexts in which power is exercised, how, over whom, and with what impact (Gallagher, 2008). Indeed, social structures such as social class, cultural background, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, religion and rural/urban location influence children's experiences of childhood 'by setting the boundaries of what is possible, appropriate and expected' (Morrow, 2011, pp. 5-6). The childhood experiences of refugees which are tightly intertwined with such social structures, are additionally often shaped by enduring uncertainty, rights violations, deprivation, isolation, and fear, resulting in feelings of 'powerlessness' and a loss of control (Jones et al., 2021; Sleijpen et al., 2017). Nonetheless, children continue to exercise their power in different ways. For instance, Gordon and Esbjörn-Hargens (2007) posit that through play, children are empowered to transform power structures and to be in control of not being in control. We argue that by viewing children as agentic meaning-makers, approaching the research with sensitivity, and recognising each child's unique experiences, children may be empowered to make decisions about what, when and how to participate in research. As such, our studies were designed with the recognition that individual children's experiences may vary greatly, that their voices are multiple and diverse as are their ways of exercising power.

Power, according to Foucault (1980), produces knowledge. With this in mind, one could posit that the co-production of knowledge in research with young marginalised children can only happen if unequal power dynamics are acknowledged and efforts are made to address them. This is possible if children are recognised and treated as agentic subjects, 'otherwise adults will not "hear" the child who speaks' (Murris, 2013, p. 246). The nature of consent is one of the many facets that characterise power dynamics during the research process, setting the foundation for how researchers will 'listen' to children as co-producers of knowledge. Childhood researchers have increasingly been designing research studies that foreground 'listening' to children's voices, with the view that even the youngest children's voices can be 'heard' when the right methods are used (Alderson, 2008). That is, given that children may not always express their views verbally, but rather do so in a range of ways including using non-verbal 'cues', effective 'listening' on the part of adults often includes actions such as 'looking' (Lancaster & Broadbent, 2003).

Nor can children's initial consent to participate in research be taken for granted throughout a study. In her research with young children, Flewitt (2005) used the term 'provisional consent' to refer to the process whereby participants' agreement to take part in her research 'was understood to be provisional upon the research being conducted within a negotiated, broadly outlined framework and continuing to develop within the participants' expectations' (p. 556). Child consent was an ongoing process based on a researcher–child relationship that was built on 'sensitivity, reciprocal trust and collaboration' (p. 556). In both the Beirut and London studies, we each adopted this flexibility and reflexivity, as crucial to listening to and learning from young children, which in turn empowers child participants 'rather than making them the objects of research' (p. 555).

Reflexivity, therefore, constantly informed our research. Berger (2015) defines 'reflexivity' as:

> 'a researcher's conscious and deliberate effort to be attuned to one's own reactions to respondents and to the way in which the research account is constructed; it helps identify and explicate potential or actual effect of personal, contextual, and circumstantial aspects on the process and findings of the study and maintain their awareness of themselves as part of the world they study' (Berger, 2015, p. 221).

Moore et al. (2016), however, differentiate between reflexivity and co-reflexivity practised with young children in research. Reflexivity, they argue, focuses on the researcher's conscious efforts to reflect on their own actions which can result in children and young people being viewed as passive research subjects. In contrast, the authors conceptualise co-reflexivity as a process during which rather than being subjects of research, children and young people actively take a 'step back from the research and reflect critically on the assumptions that researchers and participants bring to the practice of research, how participants are engaged in the research process, how data are gathered, analysed and interpreted' (Moore et al., 2016, p. 242).

In this paper, we demonstrate how co-reflexivity in the London and Beirut studies involved 'constant awareness, assessment and reassessment' (Salzman, 2002, p. 806), not only by ourselves as adult researchers but also by the children who agreed to take part in our research, and how our actions and reactions to one another shaped our interactions in a complex and dynamic 'shared duality' (Sobande & Wells, 2021, p. 6). Dodgson (2019) emphasises the importance of examining the relationships between researchers and participants while taking into consideration 'contextual' factors that impact research data and findings (p. 220). This, Dodgson (2019) argues, can be practised via co-reflexivity and can lead to deeper insights. This is especially important when conducting research with children and enabling their agency, as children predominantly tend to have lesser power and autonomy in adult-child dynamics in both home and school settings (Salema, 2020). In addition to considering and assessing the influence of actions, co-reflexivity in the two studies further involved taking into account and reflecting on the consequences of other contextual factors such as the physical environments within which the social interactions between children and adult researchers took place (Kiili et al., 2021).The conceptualisation of 'co-reflexivity' in this paper is therefore similar to Warin's (2011) understanding of co-reflexivity as reciprocal 'relational awareness'(p. 811). In these two studies, relational awareness entails how the two researchers and the child participants understood their own positions in the unique researcher–child relationships. This relational awareness was used in an 'interdependent' manner as the children and the researchers used their research relationships as spaces where they practised reflexivity and negotiated with one another by maintaining self-awareness of their own actions and by reacting sensitively and responsively to each other and to others in the research site.

In the following sections, we discuss our methodologies and present data extracts to illustrate how co-reflexivity and the process of ongoing consent enabled us to recognise, address and negotiate power imbalances with young marginalised children. The data excerpts and discussions demonstrate that while both studies required sensitivity towards unequal adult-child power relationships, the unique contextual considerations, circumstances and characteristics of each child had to be taken into account when designing and carrying out the studies.

METHODOLOGY

This section begins with an introduction to the London Study and the Beirut Study, providing an overview of each study's aims and research design. It then unpicks the common threads that emerged across the two studies illustrating how, despite differences in study contexts and aims, we find common ground in the ways in which our methodological approaches addressed core issues of power dynamics and co-reflexivity.

London study: Overview

The aim of the London study (conducted between January and July 2016) was to gain insight into 18 children's (aged 3–4) play cultures and practices at home and in the nurseries of two London state-maintained schools that were attended by children with diverse ethnic family backgrounds, with a majority being socio-economically disadvantaged. Participatory research was conducted once a month with each child for 6 months during child-initiated play time in the nursery (6 × 1-hour sessions). Each child was invited to tell the researcher anything they wanted about their play. A unique combination of methods was chosen by each child to communicate with the researcher about their play. These methods included verbal communication and their creative use of the various resources that were available to them within the nursery provision as open-ended communication tools. For instance, some children shared arts and crafts with the researcher as demonstrations of their play activities. Additionally, the children were invited by the researcher to use digital shockproof cameras, so they could capture play moments both at home and in the nursery that they wanted to include in the study (Änggård, 2015). After collecting data for a few months, the children were invited to talk sessions with the researcher where they made sense of the data that they had collected to date in relation to their play. These were scheduled and began with the researcher asking, "what's happening here?" (Clark & Moss, 2011). What each child communicated about their individual play was collated with their parent's semi-structured interview to form individual children's case studies that give multiple perspectives on each child's play.

Beirut study: Overview

The aim of the Beirut study was to gain insights into the childhoods and play of young Iraqi and Syrian refugee children living in Beirut's Northern suburbs, Lebanon, and to find out how their play opportunities could be improved. Data were collected between May 2017 and January 2018 and involved the completion of 100 questionnaires by Iraqi, Lebanese and Syrian adult respondents, three semi-structured interviews with professionals working with refugee children, and one 3-h observation of play and learning in an informal school for Iraqi children aged 5 to 14 years. To gain a deeper understanding of refugee children's childhoods and play in Lebanon, the researcher conducted case studies with two Iraqi and two Syrian young children (4–8 years) and their families living in Beirut's Northern suburbs. The 'Day in the Life' (DITL) approach (Gillen & Cameron, 2010) was adopted to conduct the case studies, with a view to gaining in-depth insight into the children's lives and experiences. The DITL approach involved visiting each home on four occasions during which the researcher got to know each family, explained the study to them, answered their questions about the research and gained adult consent and child assent. DITL also involved interviewing the parents, interviewing the children using participatory methods (drawing, using toy building blocks, and taking photos with disposable cameras), filming a day in the life of each child and then creating a 30-min compilation video from the longer footage, and returning to each family for a final visit to co-view the compilation video and gain participants' insights and perspectives into the diverse play episodes selected for the compilation video.

Rationale for bringing these two studies together

At first glance, these two studies seem very different in terms of their research aims, the contextual factors such as the language, settings and countries they were conducted in, and the diversity of cultures, family circumstances and childhood experiences of the young children involved. Nonetheless, several parallels emerged as we delved into conversations around our two studies.

A clear common thread was each study's focus on young children's play. In our explorations of play, we both strived to 'listen' to the children and co-construct knowledge with them to gain insights into their experiences, resulting in parallels between our methodological and ethical approaches. Methodological overlaps included our own positioning as researchers and our practices of co-reflexivity and provisional consent that empowered children as decision makers in the studies. We also found similarities in our approaches to sampling and data analysis. For example, we both used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques. In the London study, invitations to participate were made to all children's parents in two nurseries that were conveniently situated near the researcher's home. Although the intention in this study was to select 20 children of diverse ethnic background and sex, no selection was necessary as only 18 families gave permission for their children to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). In the Beirut study, the participating families were chosen purposively to include male and female young Iraqi and Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, but also based on convenience, practicality and feasibility (Henn et al., 2006), as the families needed to be located in comparatively 'safe zones', in line with university safeguarding procedures. To gain access to these 'hard-to-reach' populations (Kennan et al., 2012), the researcher was highly dependent on Greater Beirut-based gatekeepers. Both studies conducted thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process and explored a combination of inductive themes that emerged from the data, along with deductive themes that the researchers had identified from their respective reviews of literature.

Philosophically, we are aligned in viewing children as agentic meaning-makers who offer unique insights into their own lives and experiences. Underpinned by this philosophy, both studies adopted Flewitt's (2005) notion of 'provisional consent' to empower the children. Provisional consent enabled the children to consent and dissent to taking part in the research in an ongoing manner. Our work as researchers involved 'listening' to children throughout the research process and regularly reminding them that even though the children initially agreed to take part in the study, they were under no obligation to continue to do so if they did not want to. As researchers, we both understood that promoting young children's participation in research 'requires adults to show patience and creativity by adapting their expectations to a young child's interests, level of understanding and preferred ways of communicating' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, para. 14[c]). We now discuss our processes of gaining provisional consent, how we positioned ourselves as researchers, and how we each used reflexivity to address ethical concerns.

Provisional consent

After obtaining informed consent from the parents in the London study, the researcher approached the children to talk about the research, what it might involve for them and how their consent to participate would be understood as provisional. In each research encounter, the researcher explained verbally that she was studying at a university ('like a school for adults') and was in the Nursery to hear from children about their play at home and in the Nursery. The children were invited to express their assent or dissent by "mark making" in "yes" and "no" columns

in the research notebook. However, over time, to avoid disrupting children's ongoing play, the researcher sometimes settled for children's verbal consent rather than encouraging written assent (Salema, 2020).

In a similar vein, during her first visit to each family in the Beirut study, and after gaining parental consent for their children to take part in the research, the researcher gave each case study child and their siblings a colouring-in picture book that she had designed using outline stock cartoon images followed by short written descriptions depicting the different stages of the study. One cartoon outline, for example, depicted a 'thumbs-up' and a 'thumbs-down' sign, describing the process by which children could give their ongoing consent at different points throughout the research by simply making a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down sign (El Gemayel, 2019; Jones et al., 2021).

Although we had both introduced a specific 'child-friendly' method to gain children's ongoing consent, throughout the research sessions, we remained vigilant for any signs of child discomfort, and any verbal and non-verbal cues of dissent. Upon observing non-verbal signs of dissent (for example: children actively whispering to their peers to exclude the researcher from play conversations in the London Study; children standing behind the camera rather than in front of it in the Beirut Study) we clarified if the children wanted us to take a break or discontinue the study on that day. In response, when the children said 'yes', we respected their decision and discontinued observing them until they expressed their willingness to continue with the study.

Thus, we both created age-appropriate tools and responsive conduct that allowed us to 'listen' to the children through a process of frequently negotiating and renegotiating the children's boundaries for assent and dissent. This iterative process of ongoing assent and researcher reflexivity created spaces and opportunities for the children to develop their understanding of the research process and their roles in it, to gauge their own and the researcher's roles, and to come to understand and shift the power dynamics of their researcher–child relationships. Over the course of each study, children tested and observed the consequences of accepting and declining our invitations for them to take part. This temporal aspect of provisional consent also enabled the children to use it as a space to negotiate their position in the research over time.

Ethical considerations

We both obtained ethical approval from University College London, Institute of Education and adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) guidelines, which were the latest available version at the time of our fieldwork. All participants were given pseudonyms and all identifiable information anonymised. We developed our methodologies in a way that would foreground the trustworthiness and dependability of each study and its relevance to our respective research aims and contexts. That is, we both aimed to include certain minority participant cohorts, collect rich data, triangulate data collection methods (Winter, 2000), and reflect critically on our own subjectivity (Whittemore et al., 2001) to deliver research findings that were trustworthy and dependable in line with our research objectives.

In terms of safeguarding, when explaining the studies to adult participants we specified limits to confidentiality stating that should we witness any potential danger to children, then we would be obliged to prioritise issues of safeguarding over confidentiality and appropriate authorities would be notified. In the rare instances where there were ambiguities regarding child safeguarding issues, we consulted our PhD supervisors and took decisions and actions accordingly.

Trustworthiness and reliability

Respondent validation was carried out at various stages of each study. As mentioned earlier, in the London study the researcher asked children 'what's happening here?', which involved children in the process of making sense of the data as children had the opportunity to share how they understood their own play (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Similarly, and as described earlier, in the Beirut study, the researcher created space for participating children to reflect and express their views on the data being collected. Having generated data with Syrian and Iraqi refugee children and their families at home in Lebanon, the researcher visited each family on several occasions 'to check and confirm [her] observations and inferences' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 135). She collected data in Arabic, a language which both she and the research participants spoke fluently. Respondent validation (Maxwell, 2013) was foregrounded, as it is central to the DITL approach. Additionally, children frequently commented on what was happening as the researcher filmed a day in their lives (see. Jones et al., 2021), and were later invited along with their parents to share their thoughts on the video footage compilation during the last home visit. Respondent validation was also sought when employing participatory methods for data collection with the young children, as the researcher frequently asked children about the meaning of their drawings, block constructions and photographs.

Throughout each study, both researchers were cognisant that it is impossible to ascertain if children's understandings and perceptions matched those of the researchers. Recognising this challenge, the researchers, in their interpretations and write-up of findings, used hedging language to indicate areas of ambiguities and uncertainties. We believe these practices enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of each study's findings.

Researchers' positionality and reflexivity

Punch (2012, p. 92) argues that there is need for 'awareness of the ways in which the self and the personal affect both the research process and outcomes'. With this in mind, both researchers reflected on and documented the emotional aspects of their research experiences. Their diary entries served as reminders of the nature of the unique researcher–child dynamics that were developing over time; providing rationales for their responses to individual children, and contextual information to inform their analysis and write-up. The diary entries similarly documented aspects of the studies that may have been personally challenging or distressing, such as listening to people's experiences of ongoing and compounded hardships in the Beirut Study. In this sense, the research diary served as one of many psychological outlets that helped maintain researcher well-being in difficult circumstances.

In the London study, the researcher's 'non-practitioner-like' researcher role was communicated by avoiding instructing the children, and by taking on a reactive stance and responding to the children's directions (Corsaro, 1997). She shared control over the research agenda by inviting the children to share anything they wanted to about their play. She positioned the children as directors of their research by asking open-ended and broad questions, such as 'Can you tell me about your play?' and 'What's happening here?' instead of enquiring about specific aspects of children's play. This sharing of control required the researcher to be constantly reflexive, reflecting on her actions and reactions, all of which were documented in her research diary. In addition to her verbal responses to children's questions and actions, her non-verbal cues and responses were also part of her reflexive practice that enabled her to empower the children in

research and communicate that they were in charge of the research agenda (Pain, 2004). To this end, the researcher avoided using any attention signals that practitioners used in the classroom such as 'clap-ins' where the practitioners clapped to signal transition between activities. This helped to set herself apart from the practitioners, and instead, to join the children in their responses to practitioners' attention signals, and thus communicating her non-practitioner role to the children.

In a similar vein, the researcher in the Beirut study kept in mind her "Subjective I's" (Peshkin, 1988) and how these influenced all the processes that encompassed her research, and was aware of her insider/outsider position within the research community (Todorov, 1988). Reflecting on her Subjective I's, her choice of research topic, settings and participants was linked to the 'Lebanese I', 'Humanitarian I', and 'Early Childhood Supporter I', as 'aspects of the whole which constitutes me' (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18). Attempting to distinguish between the 'Researcher I' and the 'Early Childhood Supporter I' proved to be somewhat challenging, especially when children saw the researcher as a 'friend' or as a 'playmate' and regularly invited her to join in their play. Balancing between these 'I's' was key since the researcher knew that these children and their families felt isolated from the wider community and the children had few friends to play with, so found her presence in their house exciting.

In both studies, we were each separately deeply aware of how our subjectivity shaped the research, and we therefore designed and conducted our respective studies through repeated processes of critical self-reflection (Dowling, 2005) and in dialogue with others, including with the research participants. We each kept a reflective journal, debriefed with our supervisors and/or counsellor, and asked questions to ourselves about how our actions might have impacted the data. This led to 'deep contextualisation of the data', providing more 'vivid descriptions' to the readers and 'clarity regarding the researchers' epistemological positionings' (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129).

In the next section we present selected extracts from the case studies of Naomi (London Study) and Maria (Beirut Study) whose families experienced different forms of disadvantage, including socio-economic and/or forced migration. Furthermore, they provide vivid illustrations of our ongoing negotiations about power dynamics in our unique researcher–child interactions, lending themselves well for analysis of how these relationships can be developed over time through sensitivity and assuming a reactive stance to children's responses. We take 'the multiple case study approach' where we select extracts from each study that relate to researcher–child practices of ongoing consent and co-reflexivity (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Although we did not know each other prior to undertaking our doctoral studies or during our periods of data collection, through our post-doctoral encounters and critical discussions we have identified common threads in our approaches which we believe will speak to a wider readership in terms of making sense of how researcher-researched and adult-child power dynamics were negotiated during our fieldwork.

DATA EXCERPTS

London study: Naomi

We present two excerpts on Naomi, a 4-year-old girl whose parents are of South Asian British Bangladeshi ethnic origin. While her mother was born and brought up in the UK, Naomi's father moved to England in his early childhood. At home, Naomi has regular interactions with her

elder brother and other children, as her mother is a child-minder, assisted in child-care by her stay-at-home father.

Naomi's extracts illustrate her engagement in co-reflexivity with the researcher, and expression of her gradually developing understanding of their research relationship through language and her embodied behaviours. Before agreeing to take part in the study, Naomi observed her peers interacting with the researcher, and this enabled her to begin to make sense of the research.

> Excerpt 1: Researcher's journal during the first month of data collection.
>
> Earlier at playtime that morning, Naomi enquired about the study as I researched with other children, and she agreed to take part for the first time later that afternoon.
>
> At 2:00 pm Naomi was on the carpet exploring a toy calculator. In response to my invitation, she expressed consent by saying yes and nodding. She raised her arm, and held the calculator up close to my face.
>
> Naomi: Do you know what this is? Without waiting for my response, she said, 'This is a calculator'. Naomi looked up and upon noticing a camera in my hand at her eye-level, asked 'Do you need me to take pictures?' Before I could reply, she snatched the camera from me and scurried away. I heard Naomi initially in her eager and high pitched and then gradually fading voice, saying 'Here, give it to me. I need to take pictures!', as she accelerated, sprinting off and disappearing around the corner.

The second data excerpt (see below), illustrates how the researcher continued to interpret Naomi's playful directions:

> Excerpt 2: Researcher's journal during the second month of data collection.
>
> As Naomi agreed to "do the study", she scribbled in the 'yes' column, grinned, placed her hand on my binder and said 'let's do this backwards!' We flipped the page backwards and inserted a blank page in the binder. Moments later, as Naomi played with the toolbox, she said to me 'I'm too busy. Why don't you watch someone else play?' I said 'Ok' and began to walk away. Naomi chuckled and said 'No stay! You can sit there and watch me play toolbox' as she pointed to a spot on the carpet a few feet away. I followed Naomi's direction, took a seat, and continued to document my observations of her play. Naomi began her work with the tools...'

Through careful consideration in her responses to Naomi, the researcher attempted to create an agency-enhancing research experience for Naomi. By responding sensitively to Naomi's curiosity to explore the recording equipment and participate on her own terms and in her own time, the researcher facilitated the opening up of a democratic space where Naomi began to explore the freedoms of choice offered to her regarding the terms of her own participation. It is these processes that we refer to as co-reflexive in nature—through the processes of ongoing consent, Naomi experienced the research as a space where power dynamics could be negotiated in the developing researcher–child relationship.

Naomi was gradually gauging and developing her understanding of the power dynamics in the researcher–child relationship through her experiences of the researcher's responses over time. Prior to her initial research contact, Naomi had observed the researcher's responsive and non-directive

way of interacting with other child participants, and she had seen how the researcher followed children as they led her through their play spaces and narrated their play. One possible interpretation of Naomi snatching the camera from the researcher's hand is that Naomi was beginning to differentiate between the researcher's conduct and that of the practitioners, who would almost certainly have reprimanded any snatching action made by children in the Nursery. By telling the researcher to hand the camera over without first seeking permission, Naomi was making a stand that she "needs to take pictures", that is, she was signalling and asserting her agency in leading the research. Naomi's assumption that the researcher might not know what the calculator was may further indicate that she was differentiating between the researcher and the practitioners in terms of their relative knowledge about resources in the nursery. Here, she was positioning the researcher as a possible non-expert who might well be in need of Naomi's help and guidance.

In the second excerpt, we suggest that Naomi's instructions to 'do it backwards' and 'sit there and watch me play', indicate she was gauging and on the cusp of recognising some of the differences between her relationship with the researcher and with practitioners. Naomi leveraged the process of ongoing consent to test boundaries and signal her position of power by temporarily terminating the research and instructing the researcher to 'watch someone else'.

Co-reflexivity was practised as the researcher followed Naomi's directions. Instead of prioritising her own research agenda, the researcher interpreted these moments as opportunities to conduct herself in ways that would reassure Naomi of her rights and leading role in the study. Linking the analysis of these moments with other interactions with Naomi over time, led the researcher to conclude that Naomi realised she possessed valuable knowledge about her play that the researcher was interested in. Naomi translated this know-how into capital that she used to negotiate her own responsive position during the researcher–child interactions.

Beirut study: Maria

The Beirut Study play episode described in this paper draws on data from the researcher's third visit to an Iraqi family where she filmed a day in the life of 7-year-old Maria. The excerpt is taken from the researcher's reflective notes and transcriptions of video footage.

At the time of the study, Maria was living with her parents and 5-year-old brother Gerges in a motel room in Lebanon. Maria and her family had been forced to flee their home in Northern Iraq in August 2014 when the Islamic State (IS) was on the verge of invading their village. They were internally displaced in Iraq for 5 months before moving to Lebanon in the hope of being resettled to a third country. In Lebanon, Maria and her brother attended school where they made friends, but rarely had friends visit them at home.

The following extracts depict two interactions that unfolded between the researcher and 7-year-old Maria while filming a day in her life. The extracts illustrate how power was challenged and constantly shifting between Maria and the researcher. As each party initially attempted to regain control of the research process, it was through co-reflexivity that power dynamics were negotiated between both actors, bringing to light how the researcher's different roles within the research space influenced these dynamics.

> Excerpt 1: Researcher's journal entry.
>
> On the morning of my third visit to Maria's apartment, I set up the camera at the far end of the living room to get a good view of the whole room. Maria sits on the couch

facing the camera and watches a YouTube clip on her mother's smartphone. Maria looks up at me and asks, 'can you see me like this?' I assure her that I can. Maria stands up, walks up to the camera, and holds up the smartphone in front of the lens, showing me what she is watching, her favourite programme 'Natnat wa Arnoub'. She then runs back to the couch and asks, 'can I film too?' When I explain that I am there to film her, Maria reaches for her mother's smartphone, opens the camera app, holds it up and starts filming me as she giggles.

Excerpt 2: Researcher's notes with Maria.

At several points in the day, Maria repeatedly asks me to play with her. While I initially gently decline her requests, I eventually agree.

The camera is positioned in one corner of the living room, facing the couch. Maria asks me to sit beside her, hands me a copybook and asks me to draw Mickey Mouse. As I draw, Maria runs up to the camera and adjusts it to ensure we are both at the centre of the frame. She then stays put behind the camera and takes on an interviewer role, imitating me and the way I asked her questions saying 'OK, talk about Mickey Mouse, [...] tell me what is happening in the picture! [...] I will film you'.

As this was the third visit to the research site, Maria was already aware of the central role she played in the research study and the researcher's aim to film a day in her life. Maria actively and purposefully exercised her power, choosing to give the researcher insight into particular aspects of her play and childhood, for example, by strategically sitting facing the camera and intentionally directing what the camera captured.

While Maria exercised her power and felt a sense of control over the research process, she also seemed conscious of the power exercised by the researcher in choosing the positioning of the camera. Maria levelled this power imbalance first by using her own smartphone camera to film the researcher, then by repositioning herself as the researcher by standing behind the tripod and camera lens, demonstrating her ability to handle the video equipment, and finally by placing the researcher at the centre of the camera frame, and beginning to interview her interviewer.

There were many instances throughout the data set of exchanges with Maria and her family that brought to light their perilous experiences of forced displacement and the anguish and solitude brought about by the sudden break-up of their family and community. Maria and Gerges expressed with great sadness how since moving to Lebanon, they spent most of their time alone at home with no friends or cousins to play with. Listening to their stories and experiences allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of her presence in their home. It became clear through interviews with Maria's parents and brother, as well as through the behaviours and utterances Maria shared with the researcher, that Maria felt isolated from the community she was experiencing in Beirut, in a strange and often hostile country that lay far from the familiar environment of her extended family in her native but now war-torn homeland. The research experience seemed to enable her to reassess and assert her presence in the new environment in which she found herself. For Maria, the researcher's presence was exciting and different and, through co-reflexivity, Maria and the researcher negotiated the power dynamics in their developing relationship, repositioning and exchanging their roles from researcher to researched, and from strangers to friends and playmates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our analysis above is indicative of how both researchers sensitively approached their developing relationships with individual children. Here, we bring together the two researchers' shared position on provisional consent and co-reflexivity as means for negotiating power dynamics in research–child relationships, and we connect our reflections with relevant literature to position our work within the field of study.

With a view of the plurality of power (Foucault, 1982), negotiating power dynamics required relational awareness (Warin, 2011), agency (Clark et al., 2014) and co-reflexivity (Moore et al., 2016), allowing all parties to navigate the developing child–researcher relationships. This paper demonstrates the role of provisional consent in such negotiations (Flewitt, 2005). Conducting research with refugee children in the Beirut study required deep sensitivity and understanding of the feeling of 'powerlessness' and loss of control they had experienced as they lived through war, internal displacement, a treacherous journey to Lebanon, and were continuing to experience through unexpected hardships living as refugees in Lebanon (Jones et al., 2021). Working with children who had experienced profound difficulties related to armed conflict and forced displacement may have made certain topics difficult to discuss or remember. Such sensitivity on the part of the researcher was possible due to the use of provisional consent that empowered the children to decide what, when, and how to share with the researcher. On the other hand, the dynamic process of consent in London made it possible for the researcher to communicate to the children through her embodied behaviours that the children were in a superior position in the researcher–child power structure that differed from typical child-practitioner relationships (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007). Being aware of the unique contexts and life experiences of each child (Kiili et al., 2021; Morrow, 2011), and to ensure children were "heard" (Murris, 2013), deliberate measures were taken to communicate the process of consent with children in age-appropriate and identity-informed ways.

Beyond the researchers and participants, the presence of resources such as video and audio recording equipment in the Beirut study and the camera and notebook in the London Study also influenced child–researcher power dynamics. Controlling these resources and setting the research agenda placed the researchers in a position of power. Nonetheless, Maria and Naomi both challenged this in their own ways and took control of the research processes by exercising their own power not only over the resources but also over the researchers and the research processes (Foucault, 1982). Play empowered the children to transform power structures and to be in control of not being in control (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007). Balancing and moving between the children's 'play worlds' and the 'research project worlds' led to constant negotiations of power dynamics. Maria walked up to the camera, changed its angle, filmed the researcher using her mother's smartphone and purposefully ensured the camera recorded what she was watching. By inviting the researcher into her play world, Maria took control of the research and renegotiated power dynamics, taking on the role of researcher herself, imitating and reproducing in her own words the language structures that she had heard the researcher use, 'tell me what you see in the picture [...] I will film you'. Similarly, Naomi's physical gestures, such as putting her hand on the notebook, grinning and pointing her finger to offer a particular space for the researcher, were all interpreted as signals of exploration and negotiations of power that indicated that she was trying to assert her own agency and expertise. The researchers' responses in such instances show how through co-reflexivity (Moore et al., 2016) and a reciprocal 'relational awareness' (Warin, 2011, p. 811), the children and researchers took deliberate actions to reposition themselves and each other in the research

contexts. Through this dynamic process, they assessed and reassessed their actions and reactions to one another, shaping their interactions (Salzman, 2002) and leading to a negotiation of power and stronger child–researcher relationships.

By highlighting the similarities between both studies' methodological and ethical approaches designed to 'listen' to the children, ensure 'ongoing consent' and co-create knowledge through co-reflexivity, and through the data excerpts from each study in their unique contexts, we demonstrate how co-reflexivity was used to rebalance researcher–child power dynamics and empower children who may otherwise feel disempowered. By discussing contextual complexities, the paper draws out critical moments of researcher–child interactions, and the analysis reveals how these themes emerged from the researchers' reflections. The paper highlights the need to consider ethics as situated practice, as no matter how well prepared a researcher may be, no research plans can ever be airtight when research is conducted in dynamic environments (Simons & Usher, 2012). With this paper, the authors call upon those who work and conduct research with children, to engage in co-reflexivity with children, to reflect critically on their own positionality within researcher–child relationships across diverse contexts, and to open up spaces for co-reflexivity with participating children throughout the research process to create agency-enhancing experiences with them.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
We have no potential conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Qualitative research data are not shared to protect the confidentiality of participants' identity.

ETHICS APPROVAL
Both studies presented in this article were reviewed and approved by the UCL Institute of Education Internal Ethics Committee.

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