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Conducting research with young children: some ethical considerations

Abstract: *The recent foundation of a 'Young Children's Perspectives' special interest group in the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) reflects a general move in social research towards the respectful and inclusive involvement of children in the research process. However, established education research guidelines often provide no more than a loose ethical framework, appearing to focus on avoiding poor ethical conduct rather than proposing ways forward for making children's participation in research a positive experience. This short paper draws on my own experiences of conducting ESRC-funded ethnographic video case studies on the ways four 3-year-old children express their understandings at home and in a pre-school playgroup during their first year of early years education. The paper reflects on the processes of negotiating initial and ongoing consent, problematises the notion of 'informed' consent in exploratory research with young children, and considers questions of anonymity when collecting and reporting on visual data. The paper proposes that by adopting a flexible, reflective stance, early years researchers can learn much from children not only about their perspectives, but also about how to include young children in the research process.*

Introduction

Ethical issues arise in all aspects of research, and are particularly salient when studying vulnerable members of society, such as in the study reported here that followed the lives of young children experiencing change as they entered preschool and in the privacy of their homes. Denzin suggests:

> … our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us. (Denzin, 1989:83)

Denzin highlights the sharing nature of the research process, an approach that can serve as an ethical anchor throughout any social research. Here I report on how the notion of 'sharing' informed the myriad ethical decisions taken in response to issues as they emerged in the field, including the negotiation of initial and ongoing consent, participant consultation during data analysis, issues of anonymity when re-presenting visual data in research write-ups and keeping participants of all ages informed about the possible outcomes and disseminations of the study. Sharing decisions in this way in no sense absolves the researcher of ultimate responsibility for decisions taken, but by listening to and respecting *all* participants' wishes, it can at the very least help to balance the unequal power balance between researcher and researched.

Negotiating Initial Consent and Gatekeepers

I began the process of negotiating initial consent for my year-long study by contacting the leader of the preschool selected as the site of study and subsequently arranging a group consultation with all paid staff. During this consultation, I outlined the broad aims and scope of the research, including criteria for the selection of case study children, that is, all case study children should be 3 years old and have only recently started or be due to start preschool. I was also aiming for an equal number of girls and boys from diverse social backgrounds. The staff responded by considering individual children, proposing some who spoke very little in the setting and others who they perceived as communicatively confident and competent. They gave thoughtful consideration to the circumstances of individual family groups, the stability of their lives and potential benefits and harm for the children and their families of being included in a longitudinal study. This resulted in a list of 8 children due to begin preschool during the period of research. From the outset therefore, the staff acted as gate-keepers to the parents and children who attended their setting, and in so doing, began to shape the research outcomes by proposing particular children as central figures in the study.

There are ethical concerns when accessing research participants through a gatekeeper as the researcher risks exploiting the relationship between the gatekeeper and the person they are introducing. For example, preschool parents may feel a certain obligation to agree to participate in the research in order to 'get off to a good start' with staff in the setting, fearing that refusing to take part could damage either their relationship with the staff or the services their child receives. It is essential therefore to build in both formal and informal opportunities for participants to say no in a safe environment.

In my own research, the staff and I decided that staff should make initial contact with parents of potential case study children and make clear to parents their rights to decline to participate, to reassure parents that there would be no negative outcomes if they chose not to participate and to answer any questions they were able to. If the parents were interested, staff then introduced me to the mother at the end of a preschool session, and I made an appointment to visit the family at home. During the home meetings, the mothers[1], children and I jointly agreed 'working boundaries' for the research. For example, we discussed the frequency and length of recording sessions, the most convenient times for home visits, the need for parents, staff and researcher to respond sensitively to any indications of discomfort a child might show whilst being filmed, and the need to develop open, dialogical lines of communication between researcher, parents and staff throughout the process of research. I also chatted with the children, who by then had met me in preschool, showed them the recording equipment, let them handle it and use it if they so wished, and stressed that they could make their own films. I emphasised to the children that they could choose whether to take part or not, and that if they decided to participate they were always free to change their minds – for a few minutes, for a whole session or forever. Although this flexibility might appear unnecessary to many experienced researchers, it enabled the children, parents and staff to become increasingly familiar with the technical equipment, and this in turn helped to demystify the research

[1] Two of the case study children's fathers/ male guardians were sometimes present during home visits and also contributed, but most home visits were conducted with only mothers present.

process, empowering the participants rather than making them the objects of research. Some of the children made short films and these texts gave valuable insights into their perceptions of home and preschool settings.

In addition, I asked parents to talk about the research with their child without the researcher or staff present, and to inform staff and researcher of the child's responses. This second process of consultation revealed some clear child parameters. For example, one boy asked if the research would interfere with his outside playtime, and one girl expressed concern that the study might restrict her playing with her best friend.

As a result of consultation with children, parents and staff, 3 girls and 3 boys from varying social backgrounds were identified for case study. I sent a letter to all other parents informing them of the nature, duration and broad topic of my study, giving them the opportunity to opt out of the research. A more detailed letter outlining the agreed parameters of the research was sent to the parents of the case study children, again giving parents and children the opportunity to choose whether to participate or not.

With regard to child consent, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) clearly states children's rights to express their views on all matters that affect them. Some researchers prefer to use the term 'assent' rather than 'consent', arguing that minors are unable to give legal consent. However, as Alderson and Morrow point out (2004:98-99), in English law, 'competent minors' under 16 can give valid consent, with 'competence' defined as having sufficient understanding and intelligence to understand what is proposed. When I talked with the case study children about the processes of their involvement, and as the children handled the equipment they asked many highly appropriate questions, such as whether their voices would be on the audio and video recordings, whether they could watch/listen to them, who else would watch/listen to them. These responses indicated strongly that although only 3 years old, they were 'competent' and confident enough to grant or withdraw consent - with some more outspoken and enquiring than their parents.

As a result of all staff, parent and child comments, it was agreed to restrict recording time to 1 hour only during each 2 ½ hour preschool session, outside play would not be included and no child movements or activities would be restricted as a result of being recorded. Given that the aim of the study was to collect naturalistic data, the latter condition merely served to reinforce to all involved in the research process the need to allow children to go about their lives without consideration for the study.

The process of negotiating initial consent for the study stretched over several weeks, running concurrently with a period of initial observation in the preschool setting. Although such a protracted time-scale may sound unnecessary and impracticable for short-term studies, in all interpretive research the strength of relationships established at the outset can have a profound impact on the progress and outcomes of the study. A period of negotiation for initial consent gives participants time to reflect upon the information the researcher gives them, to ask questions, express doubts and to iron out any differences in researcher and researched perceptions of potential harm.

'Provisional' Consent

The negotiation of consent at the outset of research is often referred to as 'informed consent', yet in exploratory or investigative research the notion of 'informed' is problematic, as the precise course to be taken by the research is unpredictable. Explaining to young children the nature and consequences of research can make the term 'informed' seem even more inappropriate. A more fitting description used in this study was 'provisional consent'. That is, the participants' agreement was understood to be provisional upon the research being conducted within a negotiated, broadly outlined framework and continuing to develop within the participants' expectations. 'Provisional consent' is therefore ongoing and dependent on the network of researcher/researched relationships built upon sensitivity, reciprocal trust and collaboration.

Negotiating Ongoing Consent

Once initial 'provisional' consent has been established, ongoing consent cannot be assumed, but is negotiated in situated contexts on a minute-by-minute basis (Simons and Usher, 2000). Negotiating ongoing consent is difficult to regulate for, but during the process of gaining initial consent for my study, I voiced a commitment to being sensitive and responsive to any negative reactions the children might have to being observed and recorded. However, I was dependent upon the staff and parents' more intimate knowledge of the children to identify their often subtle signs of discomfort at being filmed. Therefore, in addition to my own growing sensitivity towards individual children's behaviours, the trust established through my developing relationships with the staff and parents acted as a pivot for gauging the children's ongoing consent during periods of observation. As mentioned, during the early stages of data collection, I attempted to establish open, dialogical relationships by encouraging staff and parents to let me know immediately if they felt that my presence was having an adverse effect on any child's preschool experiences, and I disclosed to the parents and staff my fear that my own research agenda might occasionally blind me to a child's subtle responses.

After a few weeks of recording, it became apparent that the children found wearing the small tape recorder cumbersome. To reduce this physical discomfort, I researched alternative lighter weight audio-recording equipment[2], which resulted not only in a more comfortable solution for the children, but also in better quality, digital recordings for the researcher. The choice of a hand-held compact digital video recorder with an easily-viewable side-opening screen also allowed maximum movement for myself to follow the children as they moved from area to area and from room to room. I frequently stood with the video camera at some distance from the children, using the zoom to capture the detail of their interactions. Although the children knew they were being filmed, by standing at a distance, my presence was not intrusive and did not appear to interfere with the natural progression and development of their play.

At the beginning of each recording session, I asked each case study child if they would mind wearing the small, lapel microphone and audio recorder, which slipped into the tiniest of pockets. Very occasionally, children preferred not to wear the recorder,

[2] Sony Memory Stick IC Recorder ICD-MS1

particularly if 'dressing up', where the wires became problematic, but said they did not mind if I filmed them. However, making video recordings with no audio back up did not always result in good data! The following extract, written in Field Notes immediately after an abandoned recording session illustrates one of many hundreds of large and small ethical dilemmas encountered:

> *This morning's session was frustrating. Tallulah was talking much more than usual, mostly to her mother and brother, but also a lot of self-directed speech. However, because she didn't want to wear the recorder … I couldn't record what she was saying, and she speaks so quietly I couldn't hear most of it. She didn't mind me videoing her though, and watched bits afterwards. Maybe I could get someone to lip-read that!*

On other occasions, children approached me and asked to wear the audio equipment, and then incorporated it in their play as a 'mobile phone' or a 'walkie talkie'. In such instances, I was mindful of the kudos a child gained from being the holder of relatively high-tech equipment, so to avoid exploiting the children's enthusiasm, I always asked if I should leave the equipment switched on to record their play or if they would prefer me to switch it off. Sometimes, non-case study children would also ask if they could wear the recorder or if I could film them. Although I was frequently unable to do this immediately, I tried to ensure I always had an extra tape and battery available to fulfil their wish during the same preschool session, and when possible took time to view these short recordings with them.

Eventually, I collected detailed data on just 4 of the 6 identified children: 1 boy moved away and 1 girl consistently agreed to wear the audio recorder, but then equally consistently went to play with a friend in a concealed area, such as inside the climbing tubes or under blankets. Clearly, the presence of the video was not permitted. Occasionally, the case study children asked to watch particular sections of the video, which we did together once I had completed the filming session, and I made Field Notes on the children's reactions to the film. These moments gave rich insights into the children's perspectives.

This open, responsive approach led to an increasingly collaborative framework for data collection, with staff and children sometimes assuming responsibility for the video recordings. Although the practicalities of staff: child ratios, the general 'busyness' and learning agenda of the preschool setting meant that the majority of video data was collected by the researcher rather than by the participants, the rare insights gained from participant recordings were data 'gems'. Being flexible in this way is potentially time wasting for the researcher, and occasionally, after travelling to the setting, I would be unable to collect data on a particular child. However, such instances were comparatively rare, and the benefits of increasingly trusting researcher-researched relationships far outweighed the drawbacks of loss of time as children, staff and parents came to know that they did indeed have the right to refuse.

Anonymity and Visual Data

As Price (1996:207) argues, it is better to 'compromise the research rather than compromise the participants' and this includes protecting anonymity. Official British education research guidelines (BERA, 2004) suggest that participants' identity should not be revealed, unless individuals choose to be identified, that is, participants' names should be changed, and precise details that could make a setting or participant identifiable should not be given.

However, visual methods of data collection in education research do not have a history of established ethical practice (Prosser, 2000). The main corpus of observational data collected for this study was video footage, and as the analysis focussed on how children used combinations of words, body movements, manipulation of objects, gaze and facial expression to express meanings in the settings of home and preschool, the use of visual images was sometimes imperative for the construction of a convincing argument. This resulted in a long personal journey through a minefield of ethical predicaments. Although participants' names may be changed in written accounts and erased from audio recordings, visual images make them easily recognisable not only whilst in the public sphere of work but also in the privacy of their homes. This puts children at particular risk and renders parents and practitioners vulnerable to criticism, anxiety and self-doubt.

Even if adult participants give signed consent for visual images of their children to be reproduced at the outset of a research project, participants' life circumstances and attitudes to consent may change over time. As young children grow, physical changes in their appearance make them less recognisable, but this does not negate the researcher's responsibility to protect the privacy of their younger selves. Children may give verbal consent, or, as Harcourt and Conroy suggest, young children can also express their consent through drawings and mark making (Harcourt and Conroy, 2004). Furthermore, even if the researcher makes positive comments on the data, readers/viewers of texts interpret or 'judge' participants from their own inevitably diverse standpoints. In my research I have attempted to find solutions to these contradictory interests.

Talking to staff and parents informally during the study revealed that participant anxiety about being filmed and about visual images being reproduced was associated with a loss of control. All adult and child participants were therefore encouraged to choose their own pseudonyms, to view and comment on the video data and to make their own recordings - backed up by an all-risks insurance policy for the camera. Adult and child participants have also been shown and have approved the visual images used in research presentations. This more transparent approach to data collection and analysis helped to overcome participant concerns and to reinforce the trusting, cooperative relations that were essential for the success of this study.

With regard to the use of visual images in the public domain, the researcher should reflect on the degree of visual detail that is relevant to a research claim. If precise detail is not essential, then digital technology has made possible the obscuring of on-screen images, such as 'fuzzing' participants' faces to protect identity, or using a relatively simple technique to obscure on-screen images by reducing pixel count, as illustrated in *Figure 1*:

Figure 1: Video Still of reduced pixel count image

Although obscuring image detail in this way may be unsatisfactory for portraying gaze co-ordination or facial expression, it is extremely effective for less focussed representation of body movements, such as construction activities and imitation. Alternatively, sketches of video stills can be drawn to indicate body positioning and directionality of movement.

Occasionally, I have used extracts of video in research presentations where adult and child participants are clearly identifiable. For each section used, I have gained prior permission from all participants present in the extracts, including all staff, children and parents of the children. For future projects, I plan to collate key video data extracts, circulate them to all participants and seek permission to use those extracts as still or moving images for stated and agreed purposes.

One further danger of displaying visual data where participants are identifiable is that the data is extracted from the richly situated context in which it occurred. Researchers working with visual data therefore have a responsibility to reconstruct contextual details that situate data extracts in the complex particularity of their original settings.

Each research project creates its own sets of compromises, but in education research there is a developing awareness of ethical issues in the use of visual data and new technologies. Approaching ethical issues in visual research in the manner described in this paper builds on the principles underpinning British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines suggesting that ‘all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for democratic values, and respect for the quality of educational research’ (BERA, 2004).

Confidentiality: Deciding what to leave out

Just as researchers must protect participant privacy, so they must also respect participant rights to confidentiality and avoid intrusion into participants' personal affairs. In the UK, formal guidance on issues of confidentiality is given in the Data Protection Act (1998), which clearly states that data about individuals must only be used for agreed, specified purposes, and that data should be relevant, adequate and not excessive to the purpose for which it was gathered. However, in the busy field of data collection and analysis, decisions about when to stop observing participants, or about when not to transcribe data also relate to a researcher's personal understandings of privacy and respect. The trusting relationships built up during longitudinal ethnographic research can result in the researcher being privy to details of private lives that should not be disclosed. The following extract from the Research Diary kept during the course of the study is one example:

> *My role as researcher is blurred in the homes, where the mothers and I seem to be in a new kind of social 'bubble' somewhere between an acquaintance and a friend. The recording equipment and prepared questions for interview bring formality, but this seems to disappear as the interviews develop. I'm often treated more as a 'fellow' mother, and a confidante, sometimes playing the listening role of a counsellor, hearing deeply personal details of the participants' lives that have a place in our 'bubble' but no place in my research.*

During data collection for this study, if mothers or children began to talk about issues that were clearly outside the research aims, I turned off any recording equipment, or, if this action appeared intrusive, I later erased sections of personal details. In other cases, where borderlines of confidentiality were more blurred, I kept the original recorded data, but did not transcribe it– leaving any data available for future use if later deemed to be of direct relevance to the overall research findings. Leaving data out can have strong implications for shaping research findings, so to give some systematicity to data exclusions, I made a note of all these subjective decisions in a confidential section of the Research Diary, and was therefore able to track trails of both included and excluded data.

Including Participants in Respondent Validation

During data collection and analysis, a researcher's interpretation of events may be significantly different from the perspectives of participants, and it is possible that 'what researchers consider innocent is perceived by participants as misleading or even betrayal. What appears neutral on paper is often conflictual in practice' (Christians, 2000:139).

In an attempt to ensure against any such potential harm, and to avoid the 'thwarting biases' of researcher subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988:20) that can mar interpretive research, I had many informal conversations and more formal meetings with participants to gain their insights into the recorded data. This process revealed the multiplicity of realities and meanings attributed to any single act by different participants and by the researcher. However, the timing of these consultation sessions was problematic. During preschool sessions, staff were far too busy to be disturbed, but I occasionally sat with them during their lunch break, played a short section of video and we all discussed what we thought

was going on. I also frequently spoke with adult participants during coffee breaks to gauge their responses to emerging issues. As mentioned, the children sometimes asked to watch the videos during data collection, and sometimes viewed short sections whilst in preschool. The children's views on their activities were often very clear, and were recorded in Field Notes, but the agenda of preschool activities tended to dictate how much time was free for this. There was more flexibility of time during home visits, where parents could also voice their interpretations of the data.

All participant comments fed into the Field Notes and Research Diary, where trails of ideas could be traced as they developed over time and embryonic themes began to shape data collection and analysis. For example, I began the study by observing one child for set periods of time at each activity. The data seemed to imply that different types of interaction occurred at different activities, dependent on the degree of control a child had over the activity. After consultation with staff, I began to categorise activities accordingly, gradually sharpening the research focus. Thus the processes of data collection, early analysis and respondent validation developed as intertwining spirals.

After completion of data collection, I returned to the preschool setting with video extracts for consultation with staff regarding key analytic themes. For each theme, I proposed different possible interpretations that gave rise to debate, again feeding back into the interpretive process. Similar discussions were held with the mothers and children as we watched short clips of the video together in the children's homes. Although the children's recall was sometimes sharp and they enjoyed watching the videos, these sessions were less successful than I had hoped, but have enabled me to plan future possible methods of consulting children, including shorter periods of time between video recording and video viewing, and making video recordings of the children watching the original videos of themselves.

With the benefit of hindsight, I realised that building in more time for joint viewings of selected passages of video could have enhanced the collaborative nature of the study, but respondent validation is very time consuming and could become onerous for the participants. Furthermore, it could lead to tensions between participants as they observed each other's behaviours, thus risking potentially harmful outcomes for participants. The balance between these considerations can only be judged on a project-by-project basis, but if anticipated, the format and ethos of participant consultation could be negotiated with participants at the outset.

Informing Participants of Research Outcomes and Dissemination

As discussed, interviews and consultations with participants, and the subsequent representation of their views in the research text all combine to provide a platform for their voices and give participants a sense of ownership over the data. However, participants should also be informed about the outcomes and dissemination of research texts. At the outset and even during a study, potential outcomes can only be partially known, and a general sentence written in a permissions agreement can do no more than outline unconfirmed plans for dissemination. In the case of short-term research, where relationships with participants are more fleeting, this may be the only indicator for

longer-term outcomes. However, when conducting longitudinal research, meaningful relationships are built up and these enable the researcher to recontact participants. I have continued to visit the site of the study reported here, for example to attend the preschool setting's fund-raising events. These informal occasions have provided a platform to discuss with staff further outcomes from the study. Similarly, I have met informally with all the mothers, kept them informed of new uses for the data and in return have learnt how their children continue to fare in preschool and in primary school.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has argued that researchers have a responsibility towards participants of all ages not only to establish a robust and negotiated ethical framework for their research, but also to ensure that these ethical principles are applied throughout all stages of the research process.

As Alderson and Morrow (2004) point out, one purpose of ethical reflection is to balance the potential risks of research against the likely benefits, yet this calculation is far from straightforward and short and long-term risks are hard to predict. During the process of conducting this study on and with 3-year-old children, their parents and preschool practitioners, I began by reflecting on my general ethical stance, encapsulated in the Denzin quote given in the introduction, which lay the foundations for guiding principles that informed the countless ethical dilemmas I encountered. However, reconciling those general principles with the particular ethical considerations that arose during research was inevitably problematic, and I found little practical support in formal ethical guidelines. My daily ethical practices underpinned the relationships of trust that built up between myself and the participants, and those relationships in turn shaped the nature and quality of data collected. The ethical solutions I found often resulted from sharing my reservations and fears with the research participants[3], and it is my firm belief that this sharing approach significantly enhanced the quality of the overall study.

Figure 3: Guidelines for ethical reflection

[3] I would like to acknowledge my sincere thanks to my PhD research supervisor, Professor Ros Mitchell, School of Education, University of Southampton, for her tireless support on ethical dilemmas, to Professor Helen Simons for her general guidance on ethical concerns, to Professor Jill Bourne for her advice during my Research Fellowship and to the research participants for sharing in many ethical decisions.

Negotiation of initial consent

- Have all parents and children who attend the preschool setting been made aware of the planned research project?
- Have the researchers and/or gatekeepers made it clear to participants of all ages that they are under no obligation to participate in the research?
- Have all participants been reassured that there will be no negative outcomes if they choose not to participate?
- Have participants been given both informal and formal opportunities, over a period of time, to accept or decline to participate in the research, eg through informal discussions and opt-out/opt-in written agreements?
- Have participants been given the opportunity to ask the researcher/ research team questions about the research?
- Have the participants had occasion to view/handle the recording equipment before the onset of data collection?
- Have parents talked privately with their child(ren) about the research and reported back any child concerns?
- Have all participants been given researcher contact details, eg phone number and address?
- Have all of the above negotiations been conducted in the participants' first language/via an interpreter if necessary?

Negotiation of ongoing consent

- Is the research being conducted within a negotiated, broadly outlined framework?
- Is the research continuing to develop within the participants' expectations?
- Have staff and parents been encouraged to report any ongoing concerns or adverse effects of the research on individual children?
- Has the researcher responded appropriately to any child indications of discomfort at being observed?
- Are researcher/researched relationships being built upon sensitivity, reciprocal trust and collaboration?

Anonymity, confidentiality and visual data

- Have participants of all ages been asked prior, outline permission for the use of visual images for specific purposes, eg 'for research reports, presentations and education training'?
- Is any visual data presented relevant, adequate and not excessive to the purpose for which it was gathered, eg would fuzzed faces/ drawn images or similar be sufficient?
- Have all selected visual data extracts been shown to all visible participants? Have all participants given written consent to the use of agreed still and moving visual images?

Participant consultation and research outcomes

- Have participants of all ages had the opportunity to view and comment on

data extracts to gain their perspectives on what is happening?

- Have participants of all ages been informed about the possible outcomes and disseminations of the study, including web-based formats (if applicable)?
- Have the participants been given copies of recorded data of themselves and a short report on the final research findings?

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