

Chapter 5

Research with Children

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Learning Outcomes

After reading the chapter you should be able to:

- Identify the distinct role of the practitioner as researcher.
- Reflect on the benefits and challenges of participatory approaches to research with children.
- Understand ethical frameworks and consider some of the challenges and debates when designing ethical research with children.
- Consider how to take a reflexive approach to the research design process, reflecting on key considerations at each stage.

Introduction

Educational research has been influencing policy and practice, both nationally and internationally for many years, with researchers seeking to provide answers and solutions to many aspects of children's lives. The Plowden Report for example (DES, 1967), gathered data from professionals about the importance of a child-centred approach in primary education, whereas the Department of Health report Messages from Research (DoH, 1995), focused on how to improve child protection services in the UK. The growth of government interest in early childhood settings led to an increase in research focused on the youngest

children, meaning that many elements of early childhood practice, which settings now take for granted have their roots in research. For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, (Sylva et al, 2004), used a variety of data collection methods such as child assessments and parental interviews to identify indicators of quality in early childhood provision. More recently, early childhood researchers have looked to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (UN, 1989) to support the design of participatory research which actively seeks the involvement and perspectives of young children (Lundy et al., 2011). Whilst the examples above were large national studies undertaken by paid and experienced researchers, research on a smaller scale can hold just as much value, allowing practitioners to address specific aspects of practice and place this within the context of the families and communities they work with.

Whilst recognising the numerous forms educational research can take, this chapter is specifically designed as a guide for practitioners and students who are undertaking small-scale research projects, many for the first time. The main stages of planning and organising your own research project are outlined, and the distinct role of the practitioner-researcher is explored. In particular, this chapter will focus on participatory methodologies which foreground the perspectives of children, and on action research as a way of developing and enhancing professional practice. The chapter is designed to assist practitioners and students in developing their own ethical and value-based framework for early childhood research, and explore some of the challenges and dilemmas which need to be addressed to ensure your own project benefits all those involved.

Social Research – Debates and Paradigms

When reflecting on the word research it is often easy to picture a scientist in a white coat pouring liquids into test tubes. Whilst this is consistent with an understanding of research as a process of investigation or inquiry which seeks to *uncover new knowledge* (O’Leary, 2017, p3), research in the social sciences encounters some very different challenges to research in the natural sciences. When conducting research with children, we are likely to be working in a social environment, with countless variables, and focussing on complex thoughts, feelings and actions. Because of this, early childhood researchers are confronted with a longstanding debate regarding how we might best approach research and the extent to which we can ever discover the truth. This issue of epistemology or *theory of knowledge* (Audi, 2010, p1), has generated debate across the social sciences and led to the existence of two contrasting models for understanding, or paradigms which influence the way researchers choose to design their studies, the methods they use and how data is analysed. There is so much debate surrounding these viewpoints that some authors talk of the *paradigm wars* in social sciences (Pivovarova et al., 2020).

Positivism

- The positivist paradigm has provenance in the natural sciences (Prasad, 2017) and assumes that the social world is rational, measurable and scientific. Positivist researchers usually use quantitative methods and believe in the *need to make generalisations* (Mukherji & Albon, 2018, p86) on the basis that humans behave in predictable and consistent ways. According to Opie (2004), positivists believe that *no knowledge exists beyond that which is objectively, immediately observable*. (Opie, 2004, p13).

Interpretivism

- Conversely, the interpretivist view of research maintains that the social world is much more complex and knowledge and is constructed when humans interact. According to Lowe (2007), interpretivists believe; '*[w]e create and construct our world by negotiating with others the meaning of our interactions.*' (Lowe, 2007, p11). Interpretivist research usually uses qualitative methods which focus on interpreting the voices and attitudes of the participants. Rather than seeking generalisable answers, interpretivists tend to acknowledge that findings are contextual and that there may be more than one way of interpreting the same information (Silverman, 2019).

Whilst these paradigms conceptualise contrasting understandings, it should be noted that some researchers are cautious about completely discounting one approach in favour of another and this particularly applies to decisions regarding qualitative and quantitative research. Some researchers will choose to collect a mix of qualitative and quantitative data and this can be understood as a question of considering *fitness for purpose* (Cohen et al., 2018, p285) for the area of study. Arguably, much of the research in early education takes an interpretivist view of knowledge and places participants' voices at the centre of the research design. This view is synonymous with the socio-cultural view of the world which is particularly pertinent in early childhood and informs our focus on participatory research in this chapter.

Debates & Dilemmas

A student has identified a broad interest in developing research which focuses on children's engagement with different types of resources in the outdoor area.

- *What might a positivist approach to studying this look like?*
- *What might an interpretivist approach to studying this look like?*

- *How do these relate to your opinions and attitudes to knowledge in the social sciences?*
- *How might the paradigm influence the focus of the research and what they find out?*
- *What issues or limitations might each approach present them with?*

Participatory Early Childhood Research

Early childhood research, aligned with this interpretivist view of knowledge, is widely viewed as a critical tool for understanding the lives and experiences of young children to develop practice, both in settings and societally through policy development. Underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (UN, 1989) and what Morrow and Richards (1996) call the *new sociology of childhood*, early childhood researchers are increasingly positioning children as competent social actors who can be powerful agents in their own lives, (Lundy et al., 2011). This paradigm shift in understanding has led to the development of participatory methodologies within early childhood, which aim to support children's active participation in research as a way of eliciting their views and experiences and acting on them. This has changed the focus of early childhood research from something which is traditionally *about* children to something which is undertaken *with* them, and some researchers argue that full participation requires us to view children as peer or co-researchers, involved in every step of the process, including the design of research questions and analysing results (Lundy et al., 2011).

This approach leads to a number of assumptions pertaining to participatory early childhood research:

- Young children are not only capable of sharing their views but their views can *provide a powerful counterpoint to adult perspectives* (Howe, 2016, p749).
- Researchers must find a way of engaging children in the research process, including very young children.
- Research in early childhood settings must consider children's contexts and specific experiences.
- Strong, trusting relationships are central to participatory research.

Research in Application

Think about how you capture children's voices in your setting.

- *What do you consult children in your setting about?*
- *How do you seek their views?*
- *What are the challenges with seeking the opinions of young children?*
- *How do you ensure that the children's views are valued and acted upon?*

Children's Voices in Research

Participatory research with children involves the researcher having a strong construction of children as competent and confident social actors, and a view of research as an opportunity for children to exercise their rights to participation. Some researchers have highlighted the democratic possibilities of participatory research as a way of foregrounding voices which have previously been marginalised or ignored (Hreinsdottir & Davidsdottir, 2012). However, early childhood researchers need to think reflexively (be self-aware, acknowledging your own position and influence), to consider the implications of this throughout the research process, as this approach can be fraught with challenges. Research with children must adhere

to a strict ethical code which is discussed in more detail later in the chapter, and there are a number of other issues which need to be considered. Firstly, researchers need to ensure that children's voices are given as much weight as adult voices; whilst there is sometimes a tendency for researchers to *talk down* to children and restrict their responses because of perceived immaturity, researchers must also take care to use language and develop research methods which are culturally appropriate for children to ensure they can fully participate. In addition, researchers and setting staff may find what children have to say challenging and must resist the temptation to ignore or downplay it. Secondly, is the question of power; children will be aware of the authority wielded by adults in the setting and researchers need to reflect on how this may affect children's participation and how it can be addressed, (Mortari & Harcourt, 2012). Finally, researchers should reflect on the level of child involvement in any project and consider the support children may need to do this.

The Practitioner as Researcher

Alongside the development of participatory research in partnership with children, the growth of undergraduate programmes such as foundation degrees in early years, has led to an increasing number of early years professionals becoming practitioner-researchers.

Practitioner-led research can support reflective practice and inform change and development in early childhood settings, as practitioners are in a unique position to be able to study work-based issues in-depth and frame theoretical positions in the *real world* of their practice.

Whilst this model of practitioner-led research has numerous benefits, would-be researchers also need to reflect on their positionality within the research process (Kyritsi, 2019).

Practitioners need to take on a dual role, one where the researcher is first and foremost an insider or practitioner, with established relationships with children, parents and staff and an

understanding of the practices, cultures and pedagogical values of the setting. In undertaking research, practitioners also become outsiders with a responsibility to investigate and challenge long-established practices and assumptions, including their own if necessary. This dual role can lead to conflicts and contradictions as some staff can feel their practice is being criticised, parents can feel bombarded with forms and questions and children can wonder why adults are busy gathering data, rather than spending time engaging in play.

This dual role should be at the forefront of practitioner-researcher's minds as they plan and carry out their project. The following standpoints are crucial to reflect upon when planning an early childhood research project as a practitioner-researcher:

- Develop a reflexive and adaptable approach to the project (Canosa at al., 2018).
- Be prepared for the unexpected.
- Maintain a clear understanding as to the purpose of your research.
- Reflect on how your research will impact on others in the setting such as children and their families.
- Be prepared for research to challenge professional practice.
- Understand how your professional and personal values can affect your research.

Research as a Process

The previous sections highlight the importance of the researcher considering their attitudes to, and position within, research, the nature of knowledge, the construction of young children and their role within the research setting. Leading on from this, the planning of the research project can begin, however, it is important to recognise that engagement with the *big ideas* may need to be revisited as part of a reflexive research approach. The diagram below

highlights the main stages of a typical early childhood research project, and the remaining sections of this chapter aim to support the practitioner-researcher with their engagement in these steps.

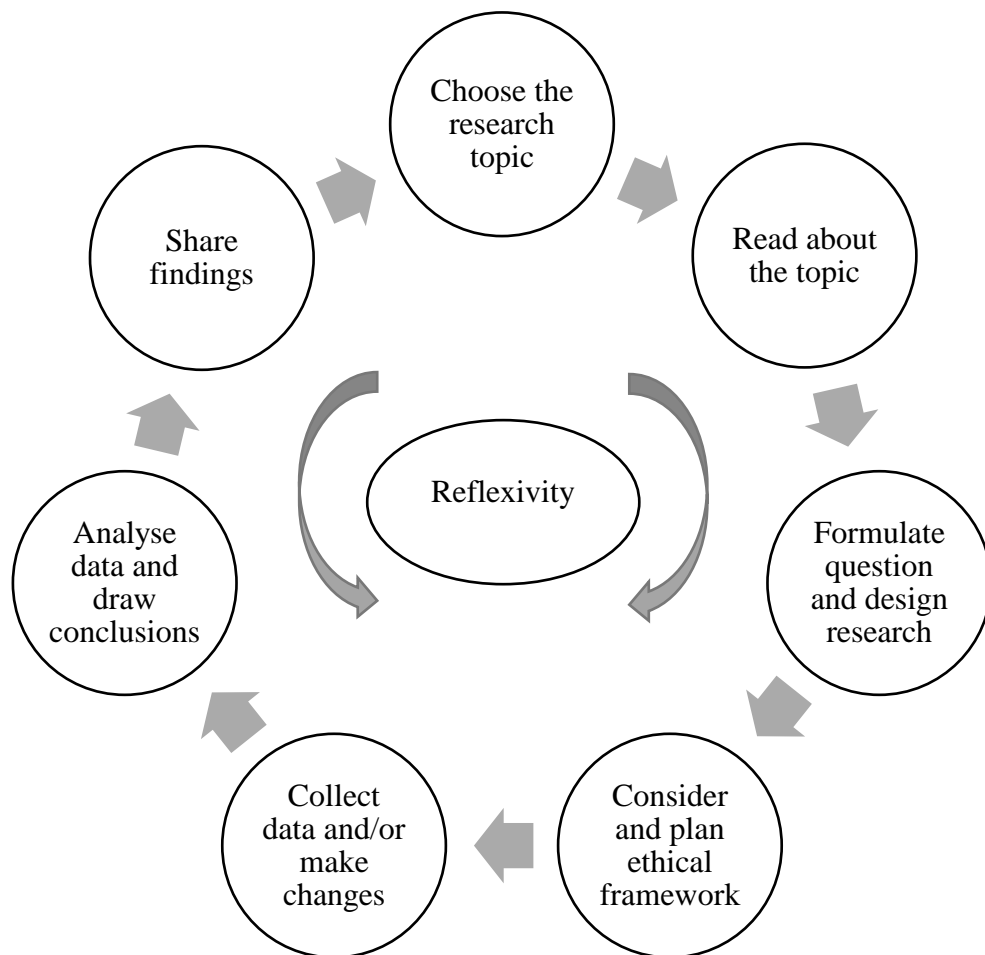


Figure 5.1 The Research Process

Choosing a Research Topic and Question

Many practitioner-researchers say that choosing a topic and formulating the research question is the hardest part of the whole research process. It is true that failure to get this right might

mean that you are spending significant time trying to answer the unanswerable, or worse, studying something which really does not interest you. Castle, (2020) suggests that questions and topics may originate from taking time to reflect on professional problems, puzzlement and wonderings. The size and scope of the research question is also an important factor to consider right at the start to ensure that your project is achievable.

When choosing a topic, reflect on the following issues:

- Choose something which is interesting and meaningful for you.
- Choose something which is relevant professionally – practitioner-led research is often about improving practice and ultimately the experiences of children.
- Discuss it with other staff – it is crucial that the setting supports the research, especially if it may challenge or change current practices.
- Discuss any ideas with your tutor, a mentor or fellow students – can you provide a strong rationale for the project in discussion with others?
- Read widely about the topic and look at other examples of research – this supports your understanding of the different perspectives and enables you to decide if this is the right topic for you.
- Where is the child in this research topic and what benefits does it have for them?
- Is the idea ethical – can it be undertaken and do no harm at the same time?

The Research Question

Once the broad topic area has been decided, researchers need to consider how to identify an appropriate question. In practice, issues such as research ethics, intended benefits of the

project and research methodology, all need to be considered when reflecting on a question, so it is not uncommon for research questions to change as the planning process proceeds. At this stage it can also be useful to consider some examples of literature related to your topic area, to help narrow your focus – of course this is also helpful preparation for a more comprehensive literature review, once you have refined your question (Yin, 2015). Many first-time researchers start with an idea which is too ambitious (MacNaughton & Rolfe, 2010), but there is also a danger that some questions can be so specific as to lack depth and clarity of purpose. Finding this balance can take time and one strategy is to break the topic down into component parts, for example, practitioner-researchers sometimes say they want to research children’s learning and make changes to improve how it is supported in the setting. To turn this idea into an achievable question, the researcher needs to reflect on making their terms more specific, for example:

- What do I mean by children – am I working with a specific age range, gender or group?
- What do I mean by learning – which aspect needs addressing in the setting? Is it about one aspect of provision?
- What do I mean by improvement – is the issue one of resourcing, or adult interactions, or planning for example?

Other issues to consider when devising research questions include:

- Avoid questions which can be answered yes or no – they will not give you the depth required for a research project.
- Ensure the research question can meet practical considerations – such as timescale, access to participants and data collection methods.

- Consider your position and construction of childhood – for example, is your question focussed on listening to children or assessing them?
- Avoid using terms which may be vague or unclear such as *best practice*.
- Avoid making generalisations or assumptions in the research question.

Research in application

Think about the broad topic you have in mind for your research project.

- *Can you break this down so you can highlight exactly what you are trying to find out?*
- *Are all your terms clear and focused?*
- *What data could you collect to find the answers you need?*
- *Can you identify the main participants of this research?*

Designing Early Childhood Research

When planning your study, it is useful to understand the difference between research methodology, research design and research methods, as these terms are often confused.

Research Methodology – The principles and rationale for how we undertake the research (Cohen et al., 2018, p186).

Research Design – A strategy or way of conducting research, for example a case study (Bakker, 2018).

Research Methods – The tools and techniques used to collect data (Bryman, 2016).

Although an important part of research is considering how your attitudes to knowledge will influence the research project, the next step is to focus in on the research design. This brings together ideas about paradigms with pragmatic considerations, such as the intended audience, purpose of the research and data collection methods. In doing so, this progresses the focus from *the principle and values, philosophies and ideologies that underpin your research* (Roberts-Holmes, 2011, p22) to the specific *research strategy* (Denscombe, 2014, p4), or *design frame* (Thomas 2013, p99).

Designing research which is ethical, fair and rigorous can be seen as a process of refining and defining. The following diagram illustrates how this refining and defining process works.

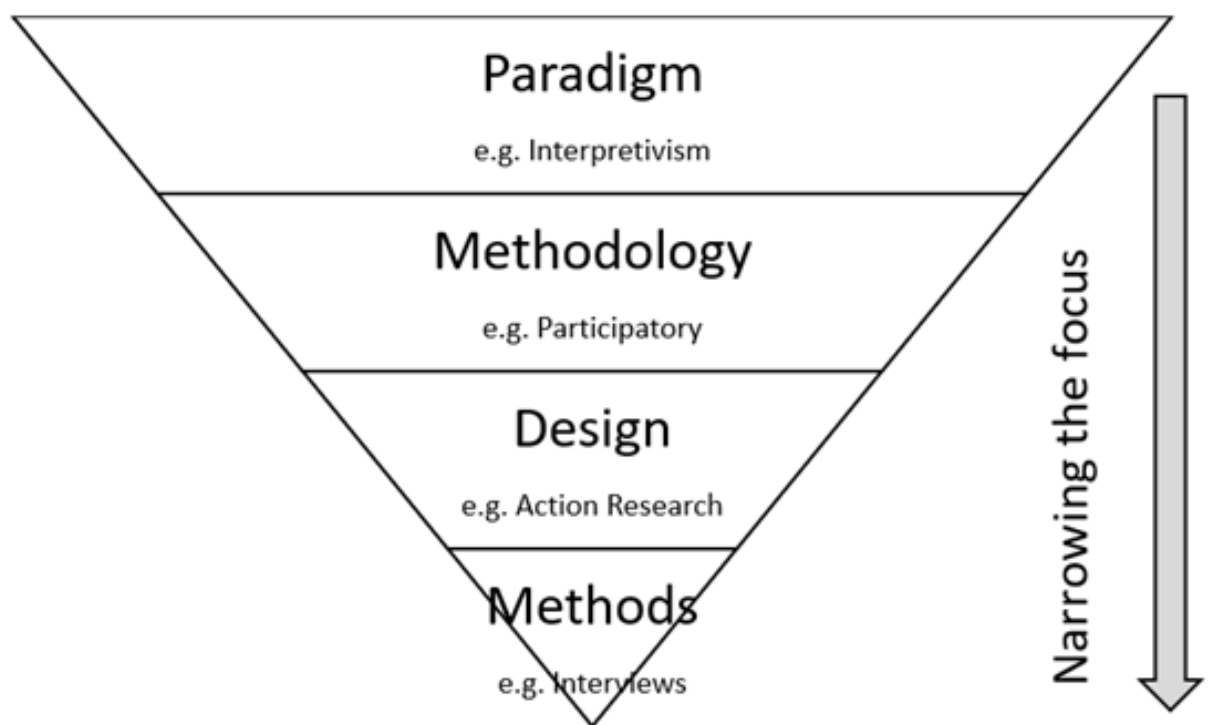


Figure 5.2 The Research Design Pyramid

Research Design

There are a wide range of established research design approaches in the social sciences, many of which may be appropriate for research within early childhood. For example, case study research, which focuses *on one specific instance of the phenomenon to be studied*, (Swanborn, 2010, p2), may be relevant to a practitioner-researcher focussed on their own setting. Equally, evaluative research concerned with assessing how well something is working might relate to questions which focus on listening to children's, parents' and practitioners' views about an aspect of practice. For practitioner-researchers the concept of an action research design may be particularly pertinent.

Action Research

Action research may be understood as an approach *emerging from real-life, practical problems* and focussed on change (Mukherji & Albon, 2018, p197). It is often approached as a cyclical process (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008), progressing from the identification of a problem to planning, implementing and investigating the impact of change. A key principle of the approach is that it should value collaboration *with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation* (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p4). Because of this focus on collaboration, and consistency with ideas of continuous improvement, action research is an increasingly popular approach in the field of education. In early childhood a study which applies an action research design is likely to be concerned with making changes to practice and investigating whether these changes have enriched the experiences of children, parents and practitioners. More recently, other forms of action research have gained popularity in education where the change or action sits outside the research process. In particular, Participatory Action Research (PAR) aims to involve the intended beneficiaries of the research, in all stages of the research process, in order to identify and address important

issues (Erwin et al., 2012). The data gathered from this process is then used to devise plans for future action and changes to practice (Langhout & Thomas, 2010).

Children and Ethics

Ethics is central to all research, with many disciplines developing their own guidelines in order to support researchers with the specific ethical issues faced in their fields. In particular, research involving young children and other vulnerable groups, poses significant ethical challenges for the researcher, requiring careful planning and a reflexive approach throughout the research process (Gallagher et al., 2010). Underpinned by the new sociology of childhood (Morrow & Richards, 1996), changing attitudes about the abilities of young children to make accurate, informed judgements about their own lives, need to be considered alongside the continuing legal and societal power of adults to decide what is best for children, (Mortari & Harcourt, 2012). This paradigm shift, in considering young children as confident and competent meaning-makers, has not only led to the growth of participatory early childhood research, but with it, the development of meaningful ethical strategies which embed the participatory rights of children.

Legal & Ethical Frameworks

The birth of modern research ethics can be traced back to the Nuremburg Code (1949) which was established in response to the experiments carried out by the Nazis. The key aspects of the code include:

- The need for voluntary consent from all research subjects.
- The need to ensure all research is for the good of society.

- The need to avoid any unnecessary suffering.
- Research subjects must be allowed to withdraw from the research at any time (Roberts-Holmes, 2011).

However, it is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (UN, 1989), which is widely regarded as the watershed for *children's* rights to involvement and participation, (Gray, 2012). Across 54 articles, the UNCRC covers most aspects of children's lives, including the right to care, protection and education. However, it is the following three articles which arguably have the biggest impact on the practitioner-researcher:

- Article 12 – *[T]he right [for the child] to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given full weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.* (UN, 1989, p5).
- Article 13 – *Children's right to express their views in any way they wish.* (UN, 1989, p5).
- Article 36 – *Children's right to protection from all forms of exploitation.* This includes protection from exploitation through research processes. (UN, 1989. p10).

Dilemmas and Debates

Whilst the UNCRC states that children should be actively involved in decisions which affect them, this is not always easy in practice.

- *How might the role of the parent challenge a child's right to participation?*
- *How might the setting make active participation more challenging?*
- *How could you ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to take part?*

Do you think there are limits to the issues children should be consulted about? Why?

Ethical Guidelines

Alongside these frameworks, a number of professional and research bodies across different disciplines have created their own ethical guidelines. Particularly relevant for early childhood researchers are the guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), who aim to provide support and guidance for researchers across the education spectrum to create work which is *ethical, justifiable and sound*, (BERA, 2018, p1). The principles underpinning these guidelines should be considered as part of wider project planning, including ethical strategies.

1. *Social science is fundamental to a democratic society, and should be inclusive of different interests, values, funders, methods and perspectives.*
2. *All social science should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.*
3. *All social science should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.*
4. *All social scientists should act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research.*
5. *All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm.*

(BERA, 2018, p4).

In addition to these professional ethical codes, Universities and Colleges have developed their own guidelines, to support students, when undertaking research. Students must ensure that these requirements form a central part of their ethical planning, paying particular regard to any requirements to seek ethical approval before commencing their research project.

Whilst it is not possible to provide an exhaustive discussion of ethical issues in this chapter, below is a discussion of some of the key ethical issues particularly relevant for participatory research with young children.

Familiarisation and rapport

Good ethical practice relies on strong, trusting relationships and ongoing communication and this is particularly pertinent when researching with children. Whilst practitioner-researchers will already have formed relationships with the children and families they work with, it is important to consider how the role of researcher may be different from that of practitioner. A familiarisation process undertaken before data is collected can support the development of collaborative, communicative relationships which can scaffold children's understanding of the research process and their role in it (Flewitt, 2005). Researchers also need to be aware of their positionality and how they may be viewed by children as authority figures in settings; successful familiarisation can reposition the adult as a co-researcher and help ensure consent is genuine and not adversely influenced by adult power (BERA, 2018). For children, staff and parents, regular briefing and debriefing sessions before, during and after the project will be required to support collaboration and trust in the project (Brooks et al., 2014).

Informed Consent

Addressing informed consent in participatory research with children is beset with challenges and debates. Chiefly among these is whether young children have the competence to understand the research process, and therefore give their fully informed consent (Mayne et al, 2016). Arguably this is why historically researchers have sought *assent* from children, with the full ethical protections afforded by informed consent sought from, and controlled by, the child's significant adults. However, early childhood researchers who view children as active

and equal co-researchers, increasingly argue that informed consent should be sought from children and adults alike, an approach which is underpinned by article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989).

In addition to the challenge of addressing children's competence in understanding often complex concepts and processes involved in research, adults also have to consider their own competence when interpreting children's views and intentions, including when they are showing dissent and wish to exercise their right to withdraw (Ericsson & Boyd, 2017), and the impact of adult power which may coerce children into taking part (Mortari & Harcourt, 2012). To address these an ongoing reflexive approach to consent is required; Flewitt (2005) argues that all informed consent is partial and researchers should use the concept of *provisional consent*, regularly returning to seek consent throughout the research project and adapting practice as required. Clearly, addressing some of the challenges of children and consent are contextual and depend on the needs of the particular children, however, some important issues to consider include:

- Developing a strong rapport and trusting relationships with the children.
- The use of creative, playful methods which consider children's contexts and experiences and resonate with their interests and level of understanding, (Lundy et al., 2011).
- Active listening skills, including being attuned to non-verbal signals, which may indicate children do not want to take part.
- Adaptability and flexibility – a reflexive approach which can change course as required, (Canosa et al, 2018).

Further to informed consent with children, researchers have legal obligations to seek the consent of adult gatekeepers. These include headteachers, setting managers and children's parents and carers, and for consent to be fully informed, researchers need to ensure that the gatekeepers are aware of a wide range of issues pertaining to the project, including the nature of the research, the right to withdraw, how confidentiality will be addressed and the possible benefits and consequences of taking part (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The privacy of children, parents and practitioners is an issue that early childhood practitioners are concerned with on a daily basis, however, during research this can be particularly challenging. Research participants need to be informed about who the project will be shared with (typically marking tutors, university moderators and other students), the steps which will be taken to protect individual's identities, and the potential limitations. Confidentiality can be particularly difficult to achieve in small-scale, setting-based studies, where the context of the setting is central to the project and the small number of participants can make it easier for them to be identified. Participatory research with children can involve some specific difficulties, for example, in a study by Norðdahl and Einarisdóttir, (2015), the researchers carefully explained to the children the need for pseudonyms and some children were disappointed that they would not receive credit for their work.

Ethics is a complex topic and there are a range of further ethical issues which researchers will need to consider throughout each stage of the research, for example there may be particular considerations relating to reporting and disseminating findings. Whilst frameworks and guidelines can provide us with principles to aid careful consideration and planning, we should be mindful that they cannot provide specific answers for every scenario or dilemma which

may be encountered. Within participatory methodologies researchers need to develop an ethical identity which is based around a focus on positive trusting relationships and reflexivity, and this is something which should be enacted throughout the research process, rather than confined to the planning stage. In particular, the ability to review the approach and change direction when confronted with challenges is vital to ensure that research with children remains ethical and respectful.

Research Methods

Beyond methodological and design considerations lie the research methods, described by Cohen et al., (2018) as, *instruments...to enable researchers to gather useful and usable data* (p 469). Choosing the right methods for the task is not easy, as individual methods will have particular strengths, weaknesses and specific ethical issues to consider. Different methods also provide different forms of data, and particular attention needs to be paid to how this relates to individual methodology, research design and participants. For example, valuing the views and voices of children through a participatory methodology is unlikely to be achieved by attempting to use quantitative questionnaires with 3 and 4-year-olds.

Traditionally the key social science research methods associated with early childhood research include questionnaires, interviews and observations. These methods still play a key part in many research projects and are explored extensively in research handbooks for example Mukherji & Albon (2018). In the context of research with children however, there is perhaps an increasing acknowledgement that restricting the focus to these methods, which were originally designed for research with adults, may limit the potential for listening to and valuing the *hundred languages of children* (Edwards et al., 2012, p 293). In response to this a growing number of research projects have embraced more creative and child-centred

methods, often inspired by the Mosaic Approach to listening to children developed by Clark and Moss (2001).

The Mosaic Approach is a multi-modal system of capturing the voices and views of young children which is firmly embedded in participatory early years practice (Clark, 2017).

Originally derived from research undertaken in an early childhood setting in London, the Mosaic Approach uses a range of methods to gather the perspectives of children, including observation, cameras and child conferencing. Like other participatory approaches it treats young children as experts in their own lives who are able to make informed decisions about the issues which affect them. The Mosaic approach is now widely used nationally and internationally to capture the views of young children. In particular, many practitioner-researchers have used the Mosaic Approach, to gather data from children, parents and practitioners, about aspects of professional practice in search of improvement.

An openness to creative approaches to research with children means that there is no finite list of methods used to listen to children (Clark, 2017), however, it may be helpful to start by considering activities related to the topic as a provocation for dialogue. For example, offering children opportunities to create maps or take photographs may be appropriate for a study which considers their views of the environment, whilst mark making or child conferencing might be more suitable for a study which explores people or emotions. As highlighted previously, genuinely viewing children as co-researchers also means considering ways to involve them at this stage, for example embracing their interests and ideas. Importantly, whilst creative methods may initially seem less systematic and formal than interviews or surveys, this does not necessarily make them more straightforward. Firstly, they require careful consideration, planning and organisation, the specifics of which should be articulated

in the research report for transparency. Secondly, the researcher will need to reflect carefully on exactly what forms of data to collect to enable them to really listen in this context. This may include obvious products, such as drawings or photographs, but potentially also observations, recordings and notes, which capture the context and the dialogue with children which accompanies this. As a result, when using such methods there may be a significant volume of data for the researcher to analyse in the next stage.

Analysing Findings

Once a researcher has collected their research data, they will need to embark on a process of organisation and analysis. This process needs to be well-planned and a good research report should provide clear information regarding how data was analysed, so that the reader understands how the researcher reached their conclusions. File et al., (2016) assert that the approach to analysis should have a *logical flow* from the questions and aims of the study. The key consideration should be how your research information helps to answer the question you have set. It is also important to consider all the data available to make the research findings honest and valid (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). Analysing data such as children's voices, images or creations can be challenging and requires us to acknowledge that any understanding of these will be limited to researcher interpretation.

Depending on the type of data you have collected, finding a starting point for analysing and interpreting this may initially seem daunting. As we have already highlighted, some qualitative methods, particularly those designed to elicit children's views, can produce a large volume of information to consider. One of the clearest ways to analyse data is to use themes to organise and present what has been collected and to decide which data is most significant

in answering your research question. Researchers should already have a good idea of the themes linked to the topic area from their literature review and considering this alongside your research question is a good place to start. Many researchers find the process of drawing diagrams helpful in deciding which pieces of data link to which topic themes. Walker and Salvason (2014), suggest additional practical approaches, including highlighting and coding, but emphasise the important point that using themes is about bringing together your sources of data to enhance insight, as opposed to separating data by collection method or source.

Drawing conclusions and making recommendations

Concluding your research project is the process of drawing the main findings together and providing some answers to the research questions. As Barbour (2013) highlights, this process should be consistent with the methodological approach and research design adopted for the study. Small-scale projects, in early childhood settings, will need to be cautious about the scope of any findings and be careful not to assert that findings can be generalised and extrapolated to other contexts. This does not mean that these studies do not have significant value though, for example conclusions should reflect the value of personal understanding and the potential impact on practice within the setting (McNiff, 2013). Across the early childhood sector many examples of small-scale localised studies are published and shared because they offer great utility, both as a provocation for thinking and in contributing to wider understanding. This consideration may return us to the paradigmatic debate, and the question of whether it is ever possible to identify unassailable truths in social research. We can perhaps best understand research in this context as contributing to an evolving collective understanding, which others may reflect on, consider and perhaps even research in their own contexts. Considering this, it is useful to conclude your study by identifying possibilities for

future research in your topic area, alongside any recommendations for changes to practice or key learning points arising from the study.

Finally, as a practitioner-researcher you should take time to carefully consider how you will share your findings and recommendations with the people in your setting. This should of course include colleagues and parents, but perhaps most importantly it is worth reflecting on how you will share your results with the children and acknowledge the value of their contributions.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored many of the key issues to reflect on when undertaking early childhood research as a practitioner-researcher. In particular it has highlighted the potential value of using participatory methods and examined some of the key ethical issues which are crucial for research involving children. These aspects highlight some of the key dilemmas and challenges which early childhood researchers are likely to face. Above all practitioner-researchers need to recognise that research is a state of mind, one which can be fraught with difficulties, but when properly planned can also provide key answers to issues surrounding all aspects of young children's lives. However, it is important to note that research is such a broad area that it cannot be fully covered in just one chapter – students should read more widely address many of these issues in more depth.

Suggestions for Key Projects

Whilst the topic you choose for your research project should be derived from your personal and professional interests and experiences, the following example suggests

how researchers can develop a project from initial 'problem' to designing your approach.

Research problem

Nursery staff observed that many children do not choose to play outside and those that do tend to engage in limited forms of play, such as using the bikes, which often leads to conflict about sharing the limited resources.

Research title

In order to use a participatory approach to addressing this problem, the practitioner-researcher has identified the focus question 'What are the preferences and perspectives of a group of 3 and 4-year-old children in relation to the outdoor environment?'

Research design

Taking the form of participatory action research, this project utilised the mosaic approach to gather children's views on what the outdoor environment should include. Children used cameras, drawings and conversations to gather the data.

After analysing the data and writing up the research project, the findings were used to introduce to introduce a new nature area to the outside environment.

Further reading

Kyritsi, K. (2019) Doing research with children: Making choices on ethics and methodology that encourage children's participation. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 44: 2, 39-50

This paper discusses some of the key challenges and decisions faced by researchers who want to undertake participatory research in partnership with young children. Underpinned by

children's rights as enshrined in the UNCRC (UN, 1989), it highlights the researcher's ethical and methodological choices when devising a research project with children about their perspectives on creativity in primary school.

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