

The Use Of Participatory Methods In Researching The Experiences Of Children And Young People

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Abstract

Participatory research methods offer a very promising approach for gaining in-depth understanding of young people's lives. However, when adopting such approaches, researchers need to be aware of methodological and theoretical issues. The aim of this article is to present a discussion of ways in which participatory methods may be used as a research strategy when investigating young people's experiences and emotions. We explore the potential of these methods as well as some of their limitations.

Key words

Child Empowerment, Qualitative Methods, Unheard Voices, Youth Engagement

Introduction

There is a growing literature on the facilitation of children as *active participants* in research rather than as *passive objects of research* (e.g. Alderson, 2008; Birbeck & Drummond, 2007; Christensen & James, 2008). From this perspective, in order to understand how children think and feel, it is necessary for the researcher to take account of young people's outlook on the world in a way that more traditional approaches have often failed to do, despite the best intentions. As is now well-documented, some methods actually distort children's experience or underestimate their potential for demonstrating their understanding. This was dramatically illustrated by McGarrigle and Donaldson (1978) who challenged Piaget's finding that young children perform poorly on conservation of number tasks. In a typical conservation experiment, the researcher asks a child if there is the same number of sweets in two rows. The child will answer correctly that they are the

same. In front of the child, the researcher spreads out one of the rows of sweets. Preschoolers will often say now that there are more sweets in the spread out row. However, McGarrigle and Donaldson proposed that it is reasonable for the child to think that the adult has done something to one row to make it include more sweets; otherwise, why would the adult ask such a question? By introducing an extra character in the form of Naughty Teddy who swoops down and muddles up the sweets, the researchers found that the child is now much more likely to state correctly that the number of sweets in each row remains the same. Sensitivity to the playful world of the child indicates that, given the appropriate wording and context, some pre-school children are able to demonstrate a good understanding of the conservation of number in different displays. In the right context, the child emerges as more competent than Piaget's work suggested. For this reason, researchers need to think carefully about designing methods that appeal to children and young people by using materials that are typically used in their everyday lives, for example, in play (for younger children) or in internet communication (for adolescents). From a similar perspective, Riihelä (2002, p. 46), a childhood researcher, observes that:

“...no matter what age or developmental phase the person is, everybody has experiences and knowledge related to their own life”.

Ethical issues in research with children and young people

Accessing the world of children and young people

Child-friendly research is not limited to the use of particular methods in the field but begins more fundamentally with a critical concern to seek children's perspectives (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011). Access to children's and young people's lives demands careful consideration in terms of how to enter their worlds and how to receive informed consent from minors, especially if the participant child or adolescent has limited verbal and literacy skills. Children are rarely able to decide themselves whether to take part in research as they are guarded by adult gatekeepers. Hood, Kelley and Mayall (1996) called this “the accepted hierarchy of gatekeeping” in that parents, carers, teachers, youth workers and any adult in authority are usually able to decide whether or not the young person takes part so that the researcher can never access children or young people directly. This can pose problems because the gatekeeper may prohibit the young person's involvement during the initial recruitment stage. Additionally, adults as gatekeepers can withhold permission for children to be interviewed thus denying them the opportunity to take part if they wish. So overprotection

can undermine the concept of children's rights where adult-imposed definitions of the young person's world remain the dominant discourse.

Several studies present a range of methods for contacting preschoolers. One way is to get familiar with the children in the role of a general helper in a kindergarten group (Mayall, 2008), while another way is to keep interactions limited in order to reduce, as far as possible, disruption to the child's normal environment (Sawyer, 1997). Others, like Corsaro (2003) and Huser (2010), try to integrate the roles of caring adult and play partner. But each role poses some difficulty. Huser (2010, p. 44) compares the process to "walking a tightrope". Bae (2005) and Birbeck and Drummond (2007) have identified this dilemma in the field of institutional early childhood research where children are accustomed to caring adults in the kindergarten environment so that a more 'detached' adult would seem strange. Researchers need somehow to keep the balance between children's right to participation on the one hand and protection and privacy on the other. They also need to consider the tension between adult manipulation (when children are involved in research) and adult responsibility to protect the minor participant. The dichotomous view of the child as a holder of rights but also in need of caring relationships with adults has been discussed extensively in the academic field (among others Birbeck & Drummond, 2007; KjØrholt, Moss & Clark, 2005).

Ethical dilemmas facing the researcher do not end at the pre-school but continue to be an issue with school-age children and adolescents, as well as with minority groups whose voices might not otherwise be heard.

Receiving informed consent

Even after successfully accessing the world of children and young people, the participants' informed consent is a crucial part of the research process. In the wake of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) there is now an ethical requirement for researchers to ensure that children's rights to participate in research are respected and that due care has been taken to gain their informed consent, including the right to withdraw. Essentially, children and young people should enjoy the experience of taking part in research and their feelings should be respected at all stages of the research process. As Brooker (2008) argues, the researcher's aim is to give children the opportunity to become "conscious participants" in the research process which makes it necessary to implement child-friendly methods of data collection and even data analysis. Additionally, Waller and Bitou (2011)

identified not only the research design but the relationships within the research as a key for participatory and engaging research.

Jennifer (2007) involved the junior school children in her research by inviting them to critique the informed consent letters. The researcher found that they had strong views on the layout, colour and typeset of such documents and that they provided useful ideas on how to ensure that children were appropriately informed of their right to participate as well as their right to withdraw at any stage in the research process. In the case of very young children and vulnerable groups, there is even more need for child-friendly forms of gaining consent. Huser (2010) responded to preschool children's wish to receive their own letter (parents had signed a participation letter before) to be read out to them which they could sign by drawing themselves if they could not write their names. Simultaneously she identified the need to recognize children's nonverbal messages throughout the research process if they wanted to withdraw, as did Gray and Winter (2011). This could mean, for example, that a child turns away, stops in his action or changes the subject of discussion to signal his withdrawal (Cullen, Hedges, & Bone, 2005).

Young people as peer researchers

A relatively recent perspective is to involve young people themselves as active co-researchers (Cremin, 2007). Jones (2004) recruited participants to a study of young Black carers of chronically ill or disabled parents and invited the young people to play an active part in the research design and analysis. The young carers helped to design interview questions and the older participants gathered some of the data and helped the adult research team to interpret the findings. The advantages included the fact that the researcher tapped into the young carers' idealism and their wish to communicate their experiences to a group of young people who often feel isolated and undervalued. Jones (2004, p. 129) notes that often the structures created by adult researchers limit children's contributions. The researcher also ensured that the unique experiences of the young carers were accurately documented and that a clear balance was kept between exploring difficulties in their lives and safeguarding their privacy. Similarly, in their study of girls' cyberbullying, Kernaghan and Elwood (2013), set up a young participants' advisory group (the RAG) to monitor the research. Amongst other things, the RAG recommended that the researchers establish a blog/website to attract potential recruits and to update existing participants on the progress of the research. Throughout, the RAG provided the research team with a useful commentary on the process.

Having discussed ethical considerations, we now present various participatory methods from our own research experiences. In each case, we present the advantages and disadvantages of using such an approach.

Doing research with pre-school children: the Mosaic approach

The Mosaic approach was originally designed in an English context by Clark and Moss (2001) as a "set of methods to gather and reflect on the views and experiences of young children (under five years old) in early childhood provision" (Clark, 2011, 323). Since then, child-friendly methods have been adapted and advanced by early childhood researchers worldwide, for example in Australia (Harcourt, 2011) and Iceland (Einarsdottir, 2011), or with a special emphasis on so far neglected groups in research, for example children with disabilities (Gray & Winter, 2011). Age-appropriateness and creative expression as strengths of the Mosaic approach have been highlighted in many studies (among others Clark & Moss, 2005; Gray & Winter 2011).

Huser (2010) carried out a qualitative study of children's perspectives on play with ten pre-school children, using tools adapted from the Mosaic Approach, such as dolls (Gray & Winter, 2011), drawings, paired and group interviews and videos to act as "as a catalyst for children to reflect" (James, Bearne, & Alexander, 2004, p. 117) and to engage the children in meaningful dialogue. After consultation with the children, the interpreted findings were pieced together like a mosaic to represent those children's perspectives on their play. Such tools created a good starting point for less formal conversations. For example, the experience of watching the videos during the interview felt more like a naturally occurring dialogue, as the questions arose from the video sequences. By talking about the videos, the danger of manipulating children's answers was reduced as children could directly refer to their play situations in the videos. However, the researcher also chose to interview the children in pairs or groups "to counter unequal power relations between adult researcher and child participant" (Huser, 2010, p. 38). "Children are used to being together in groups and together they are more powerful" (Einarsdottir, 2011, 398). Simultaneously, children have then the opportunity to share meaning in groups, as it is natural for them to co-construct meaning in their peer relationships (Corsaro, 1997; Eide & Winger, 2005).

Even though Huser (2010) noted that children were happy to participate in this method, there might be disadvantages to interviewing young children in pairs or groups and with the video prompt. Firstly, during taking the videos, children could start acting unnaturally and rather performing for the adult. Secondly, watching the video might shift children's interest from the

research to the technical aspects of the videos. And lastly, even by interviewing children in pairs, the adult researcher still has an impact on children's behaviour and their answers. For example, a child wants to please the adult in giving the 'right' answer. Such interviews might be experienced as an enriching conversation with a friend and an adult who shows serious interest in what the child has to share. However, to avoid the formality of an interview, the Mosaic approach suggests tools that go more in line with children's creative, non-verbal expressive forms.

Drawing is a typical activity in pre-schools and has found its way into research with children, not only in a developmental-analytical way but rather to explore children's meaning-making (Einarsdottir, 2011). Drawings are undertaken under a specific question, for example to draw diverse play school experiences (Einarsdottir, 2011) or their favourite play episode with a friend (Huser, 2010). "Recalling the highlights of their best game is enjoyable" (Kalliala, 2002, 23), but instead of just talking about it, the children can express themselves through their drawing. Einarsdottir (2011) chose a process-oriented and meaning-making approach to analyse children's drawings which included taking children's narratives while they were engaged in the drawing activity into account. In fact, lively discussions arose during the activity. Huser (2010) had observed similar reactions in implementing this method, and Harcourt (2011) describes the continuing participation even in the data analysis phase, where children themed the drawings by looking at all participants' pictures. However, Clark & Moss (2001) question children's ability to interpret drawings in such a context and considered that some children might regard their own drawings as less valid.

Instead of drawings, photo-tours were introduced in the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001; 2005) and have been successfully implemented in studies with pre-school aged children (among others Harcourt, 2011; Huser, 2010). Taking and sharing photographs seemed to be fun for children and a "powerful new language" for them (Clark & Moss, 2001, 24).

Both drawings and photographs have advantages and disadvantages. The strength of the Mosaic Approach is that there are always a number of participatory tools from which the children can choose. By piecing the mosaic from the range of diverse data collection tools, the researchers increase the quality of their interpretation. However, the researcher should not underestimate the time-consuming process of data interpretation and complexity using such a multi-method approach (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Using vignettes and cartoons to access the perceptions and experiences of children

A number of researchers have used pictorial vignettes as a child-friendly way of gaining access to the thoughts and feelings of children about sensitive topics. For example, Ttofi and Farrington (2008) asked 10-12-year-olds questions about the emotions they felt if they were in the position of the child in a series of pictorial vignettes. The researchers were able to discover the complexity of emotions experienced by bystanders in bullying situations, including anger, shame, remorse or guilt. They also found that the social context in which bullying takes place has a powerful impact on how the bystanders react, whether they intervene to help the victim or actively support the bullies. The use of the cartoon characters in the vignettes appeared to free the children to explore difficult emotions in more detail than they would have done through direct questioning about their own behavior in such situations.

Similarly, Jones, Manstead and Livingstone (2011) used scenarios of text-messaging to access the views of 10-11-year-olds and found that the group plays a significant role in determining how children respond when faced with such a situation. Children used the vignettes to explore such issues as affiliation with a powerful group of peers in order to have protection from violence. They also explored the issue of group-based emotions of pride, shame and anger about behavior towards more vulnerable peers. For example, the participants discussed the phenomenon that some groups feel pride at the discomfort felt by the recipient of insulting text-messages in ways that were made easier by the fact that they were not discussing their own behavior but that of a character in a vignette.

Jennifer and Cowie (2012), in a study of 64 10-11-year-olds moral emotional attributions in relation to bullying, adapted pictorial vignettes from the SCAN drawings developed by Almeida et al. (2001) for a European study. The set of 14 A4-size drawings included one neutral vignette followed by 9 vignettes depicting mean and unpleasant behavior performed by an individual or group. The remaining four vignettes completed the set of drawings each representing a different outcome to the story in terms of distinct roles taken by adults and peers: **optimistic** (the children all play together); **pessimistic** (the victim remains alone); **peer support** (the victim seeks the support of a peer); **adult support** (the victim seeks the support of an adult). The results were illuminating. Children distinguished clearly amongst the range of emotions experienced by the hypothetical cartoon characters of bully, victim and bystander. For example, the 'victim' tended to be characterized by worry and shame while the 'bully' was characterized by pride and indifference. The 'bystander' character's attributions of worry and shame (similar to those of the 'victim') were balanced by the participants' awareness of pressures from the peer group to act negatively towards vulnerable peers, especially when the group had assigned them such labels as 'loser'. The

participants in the study revealed their understanding of the conflicting emotions that bystanders may experience when surface behavior of indifference or even amusement at the victim's discomfort are complemented at the same time by inner feelings of shame and remorse.

In each of the studies quoted above, the researchers indicated the enjoyment experienced by the young participants as they engaged with the research task as well as the seriousness with which they addressed the various situations in the pictorial vignettes. As in role play, the great advantage of this approach is that the presentation of a fictitious set of characters appears to be liberating and facilitates the exploration of complex emotions. The inference on the part of researchers is that the young participants 'project' their own thoughts and feelings onto the characters and use the narrative process to engage creatively with the issue under investigation. At the same time, researchers are also aware that there are potential disadvantages. While participants appear to respond genuinely to the hypothetical situation as described in the vignette, we do not know if this is how they would respond in real life. Additionally, as Jennifer and Cowie (2012) point out, there may be the risk that some children feel the need to present socially desirable responses about, for example, self as bully or narratives that affirm the school's philosophy rather than their real views in an attempt to appear prosocial to the researcher.

Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) as a participatory method of enquiry

Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) (Kagan, 1984) is a qualitative interview approach designed to access people's experiences as close to the moment of interaction as possible (Larsen, Flesaker & Stege, 2008). As a process-focused interview method, IPR potentially allows the researcher deep insights into interpersonal interactions by directly asking the participants to comment on the sections of video recording that are deemed to be important to them. It has been used extensively in the caring professions, typically to facilitate understanding of client experiences as they interact with a professional caregiver. The method captures in-the-moment experiences by video-recording a single interaction which is then viewed soon afterwards by the client and/or professional with a research interviewer who was not involved in the original interaction.

Following extensive experience of using IPR with trainee counselors, Cowie et al. (1994) adapted the method for use with children engaged in cooperative group work. They then investigated the impact of cooperative group work on five classroom groups in three inner-city primary schools over a period of three months. Using IPR, they asked group members to recall thoughts and feelings while they watched a video of their group as it engaged in a cooperative activity.

IPR involves the presence of two roles: the *inquirer* and the *recaller*. The inquirer (in this case the researcher) facilitates recall of the event through a series of open questions. The standard IPR questions were adapted to be child-friendly and included such questions as: 'How were you feeling then?'; 'Did you have any feeling towards the other person?'; 'What do you think the other person felt about you?'; 'If that feeling had a voice, what would it say?'. The key point is that the recaller (in this case a child) has the responsibility for stopping and starting the video at points that are meaningful for him or her. The questioning stance of the inquirer, at the point where the recaller stops the video, helps the child to explore in detail aspects of the group experience that might otherwise not be expressed. Each member of a group had the opportunity to recall events, describe emotions they felt and share them with the group.

Results indicated that that IPR was a sensitive method for recording changes in the children's emotions over time, including the expression of empathy when someone had been upset, and the capacity to reflect on self and others in the group context. A key finding was that the quality of the group composition had an impact on whether the children worked well together or not. Pupils in cooperative groups were able to express feelings more openly, could give and take constructive criticism and demonstrate more sensitivity to one another's feelings, including anger and hurt. These groups were characterized by humor and a sense of enjoyment. Conversely, children in less cooperative groups were more likely to overrule vulnerable members of the group. In these groups, for example, IPR elicited expressions of contempt on the part of the more domineering group members and there was little expression of empathy for others' distress.

An advantage of the IPR method in this study is that, since all had the opportunity to take part in IPR, the more vulnerable children had the chance to express how they felt in a safe environment. IPR enabled them to express emotions that they had been unable to share at the time of the original interaction. It also provided an opportunity for all to reflect on the ways in which they interacted with one another. A disadvantage is that, without skilled facilitation on the part of the inquirer, children might be left with difficult emotions, particularly in situations where there is an imbalance of power within the group. Veale (2005) suggests that these kinds of approaches can discriminate against children who are perceived as 'low status' by their peers, whether by socio-economic background, gender, race or disability. The researcher needs to be skilled in facilitating groups and in conducting an appropriate debriefing activity after the IPR session so that no-one is left feeling uncomfortable or upset.

Researching adolescents who are disadvantaged using digital platforms to gather data

With the rise of new media technology there has been an increase in the use of different platforms as a means to conduct social research. As Buckingham (2009, p. 633) observes:

“In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the potential of so-called ‘creative’ methods in media research, and in social research more broadly.... Such methods typically, although by no means exclusively, employ visual means of representation, such as drawings, photography and video. Asking people to ‘create’ media ... can, it is argued, reach the parts that other methods have failed to reach”.

Although the validity of such research is still open to intense debate, exploring the use of the visual is emerging as a productive method when dealing with disadvantaged or ‘voiceless’ groups (Pink, Hubbard, O’Neill, Radley, 2010), such as children and young people. The use of video “flip” cameras, digital voice recorders and digital cameras, it is claimed, helps young people to engage with the research process, record and document with familiar digital equipment, so making the process an enjoyable one. This is especially pertinent when researching sensitive topics such as young people’s fear of crime in the neighborhood by asking them to identify areas that cause them fear and anxiety. To the adult researcher an area might appear simply a place for recreation while to the young person it is an area of danger. The power of the visual image, with accompanying narrative explanations, provides a symbolic meaning to the location that would otherwise be overlooked by the adult researcher.

By employing digital techniques to obtain research material, the young person is more likely to feel empowered by the research process and in control of their participation. During the project by Myers and Thornham (2012), the young people were able to delete material they were not happy with, but their insistence on keeping certain works was actively encouraged and resulted in rich data which, for this particular group, would not have been gathered through more traditional qualitative or quantitative methods.

Capturing young people’s experiences through open-ended interviews

Certain settings control the forms of permissible data collection and preclude use of methods involving video or digital data collection. In Young Offender Institutions, for example, cameras are forbidden and research access is closely monitored by adult gatekeepers. Within the confines of such locations the creative use of open-ended interview is an ideal form of data collection. The in-depth, open ended interview facilitates a supportive environment. During research carried out in Young Offender Institutions in England, Cowie, Hutson and Myers (2007) found that the young prisoners welcomed the chance to talk to someone from the “outside world”. Prisoners are vulnerable because of their lack of freedom and lack of personal autonomy. Their voices can easily

be undermined by their status as convicted persons and too often their views are dismissed on the basis that they are unreliable witnesses, that they are prone to telling lies and that they are incapable of giving sensible answers to researchers' questions. In their study, Cowie et al (2007) balanced the rigor of scientific research with the need to give a voice to a group of young people who are often ignored on the grounds of being 'too difficult' or 'incoherent' to be taken seriously (Bartlett and Canvin, 2003).

Discussing issues such as mental health needs, bullying or violence, the process of confidential, individual interviews enables the young person to express how they feel which often cannot be achieved in group situations. The sensitivity of the interviewer is crucial in these situations. Before engaging in the research it is necessary to explain exactly what will happen during the process of interview. It is essential to establish that the role of the interview is actually to glean the young person's opinion and that any information provided will not be divulged to staff. Consent for the interview to be recorded has to be obtained, along with the right to withdraw from the interview process at any point (Myers, 2006). It has been argued that giving young people a sense of power in a research situation improves the relationship between the researcher and the individual taking part (Scott, 1997).

Conclusion

A number of important issues arise from our overview of participatory research methods with children and young people.

Firstly, there remain huge ethical issues in researching children and young people. Fundamental is the need for awareness on the part of researchers of the power imbalance between adults and children/young people. Children and young people are rightly viewed as in need of protection but if this is misused it can involve elements of surveillance and control by dominant adults who assume that they have full knowledge of the situation and know 'what's best' for their young participants. As we highlighted, adult gatekeepers may protect children but can also deny them their right to take part. Participatory methods have more potential to enable the children to express themselves and get their voices heard.

Secondly, critical reflection is essential in order for the researcher to be conscious of the two responsibilities of the process: to gather valid data and simultaneously respect participants' rights and emotional wellbeing. Cremin (2007, p. 149) highlights the need for researchers to avoid replicating systems and structures that are inherently damaging to young people. She emphasises the necessity for genuine engagement with young people in order to ensure a more equal balance

of power in the research process. Researchers in this field need to be confident that they are developing methodologies that play to the strengths of the young participants rather than their weaknesses. From this perspective, the researcher is the inexperienced adult who is prepared to listen and learn from the children.

Thirdly, participatory research is characterized by a concern for the rights of children and young people. Researchers in this field typically have a strong desire to enable their participants' voices to be heard, particularly in the context of marginalized young people, such as young carers, children in care and young offenders. This concern is often balanced by huge enthusiasm on the part of the participants who typically express their deep desire to share their experiences and to represent others in a similar situation as if they were young ambassadors. This is especially moving when the participants are 'invisible' and 'unheard' as the narratives of the young carers and young offenders demonstrate so graphically.

Fourthly, the area is inspiring and one that has been evolving for at least 15 years. However, it still remains marginal to mainstream research. Samples are often very small so it is difficult to make generalizations. The data, although qualitatively rich, can be 'messy', 'chaotic' and 'overwhelming'. Research of this type tends to be rejected by mainstream academic journals. For example, as highlighted by Ince (2004), once the research is completed, the process involved in finding a publisher can be arduous. Her book on the lived experiences of young Black adolescents leaving care took a long time to be accepted for publication. She describes her joy when she showed the printed book to one of the young participants who responded: "...at last we have a voice. For years I wanted someone to listen." (Ince, 2004, p.231). There is an urgent need to develop sophisticated qualitative methods of analysis, as the Mosaic Approach has demonstrated, in order to gain credibility with mainstream academia.

In conclusion, the selection of relevant child-friendly methods in this article was guided by our own experience as researchers. We do not claim to speak for all young people in every possible context nor do we claim to present every qualitative method available to researchers in this field.

However, we have focused on those areas of research with which we are familiar, to include perspectives on peer relationships from childhood through to adolescence, observing children at play and the experiences of young offenders of incarceration. The examples are provided to illustrate the key issues involved with children and young people at different stages of their development and in different contexts. As we argue, the methods pioneered by the Mosaic Approach that involve young participants in using such tools as video cameras, photographs, guided tours of the environment and drawings, are applicable from early years through to

adolescence when adapted, with the help of the young people involved, to the particular contexts of their lives. Much research in the past treated children and young people as lacking in skills and knowledge when in fact it was the methodology adopted by the researchers that failed to capture the wealth and depth of their lives. The discussion, we hope, draws out the debate into wider aspects of young people's experience. Our intention is that researchers in the field can apply our observations and conclusions to their own areas of investigation.

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