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Child Participatory Research Methods: attempts to go 'deeper'

Abstract

With the growth of participatory research with children has come a problematisation of such approaches, specifically the often unaddressed power inequities in the research relationship and the unreflexive use of methods. A growing focus on the complex, fluid and multi-layered process of child participatory research has resulted from such critical work. This article discusses a participative research project with children and young people in Ireland and examines attempts to achieve deeper participation through the use of children and young people advisory groups, mixed visual and discursive group methods while questioning the appropriateness of ethical rigidity in research with children.

Keywords

Research with children; participatory methods; power; representation; deeper participation.

Introduction

Child participatory research has rapidly expanded over the past two decades. However, this research approach has more recently been problematized, particularly in relation to the unreflexive use of methods and the tendency to underestimate the power dimensions at play. A growing focus on the complex, fluid and multi-layered process of child participatory research has resulted from such critical work. This article explores the possibilities for deeper participation against this backdrop, referring to aspects of a participatory research

study with children and young people in Ireland. Specifically, it looks at the possible role and contribution of child and youth advisory groups as a means of empowering children. It reflects on whether visual aids and activity focused interview processes, in particular the use of mapping, are helpful in achieving more authentic 'voice' and explores some of the challenges in using these methods in group contexts with children. Finally, while welcoming greater attention to the risks of research for child participants, it examines the implications of increasing rigidity around ethical requirements for reinforcing power relationships.

Participatory research methods with children

Recognition of the value of child participatory research utilising creative research methods and the expansion of such research has been well documented (Christensen and James, 2008; Kellett, 2010). The need to understand children and how they experience the world has been central to this endeavour (Winstone et al., 2014). Methods of participatory research are believed to enable young people to speak openly about their lives in unthreatening contexts (Ansell et al., 2012), although Uprichard (2010) maintains that widening the scope of such research beyond the issues and 'lifeworlds' of childhood so as to inform other areas of social research is critical. Child participatory research is primarily group and activity based using interactive methods including, puppetry (Epstein et al., 2008), drawing (Elden, 2012), storytelling, role play and lifelines (Thomas and O' Kane, 2000), walking tours and camera work (Clark, 2001), and mapmaking (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012) as a basis for group discussion and, sometimes, analysis. However, it is not the methods themselves but the social relations involved in the co-production of knowledge which makes the research participatory (Gallagher, 2008).

Influences on participatory research methods with children

The development of child participatory research approaches has been influenced by childhood studies, the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and the conceptualisation of children as relational beings. Childhood studies presents childhood as a social construction and a structural category of society; it places an emphasis on children's 'here and now' status, on children as beings as well as becomings; and it conceptualises children as agentic with the strength and capabilities to shape their childhoods. It argues for children's competence to share their experiences and emphasises children's rights to decide about the nature and extent of their participation in research (Qvotrup, 1994; James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Corsaro, 1997; Uprichard, 2008). Informed by this paradigm, children are now considered as active participants in the research process, as subjects of research rather than objects (Hunleth, 2011). This has led to a significant shift in the way research on children's experiences, knowledge and perspectives is being carried out and the role of children within the process. Children are increasingly acting as advisors or co-researchers and, in some cases, primary researchers (as in Jones' (2004) research on the experiences of Black children with caring responsibilities and Byrne et al. 's (2009) research on early school leavers in Ireland).

Childhood studies emphasises that there is no one childhood (Featherstone, 2004). Accordingly, child participatory research is gradually reflecting the diverse life worlds of children including those in the Global South (Ansell et al., 2012), in cities (Christensen and O'Brien, 2002; Gülgönen and Corona, 2015), in rural areas (Powell et al., 2013); and 'lesser

heard' children including those with disabilities (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014), those living in the care system (McEvoy and Smith, 2011) and unaccompanied minors (Hopkins and Hill, 2008). Elden (2012), among others, argues that childhood studies has been a powerful tool in bringing the silenced voices of children into the debate.

Respect for children's rights, based on the UNCRC conceptualisation, is also understood to have had a radical impact on research practice, with arguments that

> researchers have a distinctive responsibility to live up to the spirit of the Convention, and to advance respect for children's rights more generally through their work (Hammersley, 2014: 4).

Many have cited Article 12 of the UNCRC, more commonly known as the 'Participation' Article, as central to the growth of participatory methods (Beazley et al., 2009; Kellett, 2010; Lundy and McEvoy, 2012; Horgan et al., 2015). Nonetheless, some have argued that the foundational right of autonomy has been diluted to that of participation in the UNCRC as it is framed within the 'best interests of the child' and constrained by judgements of competence or maturity so that children can be heard and influence decisions but not make decisions (Alderson, 2012). This can result in an emphasis on consultation which, although worthwhile, carries the risk of tokenism and in its most negative form serves to legitimise local, government or school policy (Kesby, 2007; Todd, 2012). Furthermore, many have criticised the UNCRC as being primarily informed by Western liberal assumptions and for lacking a communitarian philosophy (Twum Danso, 2009; Alderson, 2012; Hammersley, 2014). Finally, as Alderson (2012) points out, the UNCRC while enshrining some key rights for children does not specifically mention research.

One unfortunate side-effect of the UNCRC, has been a tendency to set children's rights in opposition to adults and construct a discourse of children as independent entities and rights holders removed from their social, economic and cultural contexts. However, this is increasingly challenged from within childhood studies along with a rejection of many of the modernist dualisms of childhood - social/natural, structural/transitional and being/becoming (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2011; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). This has led to a greater appreciation of the fluid, relational nature of children's lives (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Central to this position is a perception of children and young people as individuals having responsibilities, living relationally, inter-generationally and in their communities (Mayall, 2002) and a call for children's participation to be located within a framework of intergenerational dialogue (Wyness, 2013). This perspective emphasises the interdependency between children's 'voice' and their socio-cultural environments (Kjørholt, 2004) where the interaction of development and environment influences the judgement of what is important to children and young people and also how children's voices are constructed (Todd, 2012). Thus, participatory research with children is recognised as a relational process which involves generational and power differentials.

All of these influences have resulted in a child participatory research movement which has brought a new understanding of children's views and experiences, values and competencies (Alderson, 2012). Increasingly, this is also revealing the challenges in eliciting children's 'authentic voice' (Spyrou, 2011) and achieving deep participation (Kesby, 2007).

The study

Against the backdrop of the children's participatory research methods landscape, I led a research team on a study commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland. The aim of this was to explore the extent to which children and young people, aged seven to seventeen, participate in decisions on matters affecting them in their homes, schools and communities. In total, ninety three children and young people living in varying socio-economic circumstances in both rural and urban environments were involved as participants either in group interviews (80) or as children and young people advisory group members (13). Teachers, parents and youth workers (34) were also interviewed. A child participatory approach informed the design and implementation of the study which comprised the establishment of children and young people's advisory groups (CYAG's), use of methods appropriate to the children and young people's age and understanding, and provision of fun, safe spaces for children and young people who took part in the research (Barker & Weller, 2003). Methods developed specifically for the research included 'Human Bingo' to facilitate the process of getting to know one another through sharing amusing information; decision-making games; voting; interactive floor mats depicting home, school and community spaces; and child and young person friendly group interview guides to capture their lived experiences of participation. The study will be referred to briefly in the following discussion on the challenges of child participatory research but will be drawn on in more detail for the final section offering some thoughts on child participatory research.

Problematisation of children's participatory research

Against the backdrop of increasing research with children, more recently there has been strong critical debate about methodological aspects (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Elden, 2012; Hunleth, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). The problematisation of child participatory research has centred around two key issues – power relationships and the complexity of representation.

Firstly, the assumption that such research is empowering has been questioned (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) with some contending that, in fact, it can recreate and even exacerbate power inequalities between adults and children (Schäfer and Yarwood, 2008; Todd, 2012). These power inequities relate to the people involved in the research, the context in which the research is conducted and the research process itself each of which will be examined briefly. The gatekeeping functions of key adults, the positionality of the researcher as an adult, research processes which facilitate certain voices over others, power dynamics within groups of young people themselves, and the institutional context in which the research is conducted are all relevant when examining power in child participatory research.

While power is implicit in any research, it is especially pertinent in research with children involving adult researchers and gatekeepers in the form of ethics committees, parents, teachers, youth workers and other adult stakeholders (Hunleth, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). In our study, we were reliant on schools and youth centres to select the child and youth participants. While we made every effort to communicate our desire to have as representative a group of participants as possible, ultimately we had very little control over

the selection process and, especially in schools, found that the children asked to volunteer were those deemed to be articulate and 'good' representatives. This may be partly explained by adult gatekeepers concern to protect the well-being of vulnerable children (Hopkins, 2008; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014) but is often used as a means to control the process and outcomes (Spyrou, 2011).

Not only are certain children excluded from research but those who do participate can experience it as disempowering. Ansell et al., (2012) make the point that the participatory process itself is not neutral and systematically facilitates certain dominant voices while subduing others. The positionality of the researcher in terms of age, 'insider' or 'outsider' status, race, gender, class and personal biography is important. In this study, the research team was comprised primarily of white, middle class female academics (with a male researcher involved in two of the 10 focus groups). Child participatory research has attempted to respond to this by developing innovative participatory and creative methods which place the child at the centre of proceedings, including the use of child and youth advisory groups, some of which I will discuss later. Another potential for research with children to be experienced as disempowering, and which has been given limited attention, lies in the multiple-power relations among young people themselves which affect the research process (Schäfer and Yarwood, 2008) including peer group cultures and classroom dynamics that work against fairness and collegiality (Todd, 2012). In this regard, Kellett (2010) makes the point that children are not exempt from power differences that are ascribed to different groups of children.

The importance of the research setting in terms of its implications for the research process with children is explored in Spyrou's (2011: 155) work on Greek-Cypriot children's national identities,

> the structured and highly controlled space of the school encouraged children to provide the 'correct answer' while the more child-controlled neighbourhood playground provided them with significantly more leeway to draw upon alternative discourses.

In our study, the issue of institutional space and power dynamics became apparent in the Children's Advisory group when a teacher sat in on the first meeting held in the school, despite agreement that the process would only involve the children and researchers. This was resolved before the next meeting but completely altered the nature of the interaction within the group on that occasion and had a limiting effect on discussion, particularly given that school was one of the spaces for participation in decision-making being explored with the children. That schools emerged negatively in the findings is, however, an indication that the spatial context did not silence their opinions but also reflects the fact that research was conducted outside of school settings to balance this potential. Johannson (2012) details the difficulties encountered in her research with children in school on eating and food where efforts to act as co-researchers, working on equal terms with the children, were thwarted by the expectations of the children around adults' roles in the school environment. These, as well as the organization of time and space in school, resulted in researchers being positioned in the teacher's role. This begs the question of whether a less adult-controlled social setting might offer a different understanding of a particular issue and more freedom for children to voice those understandings than a highly constrained setting like a school?

Schools may often be the only feasible way of accessing groups of children in the timeframe for much research. However, utilising a wide variety of settings in our study – large and small schools, youth projects, youth cafes, youth groups – all with very different purpose, ethos, structure, size and location, helped to counteract the possibility of such context limitations.

The social, cultural and political context of research is also important. Ansell et al., (2012) argue that adult researchers have not sufficiently attended to local social inequalities and power relations in their participatory research with children. Specifically, some research settings in which participatory research is being conducted may lack a deliberative democracy culture or structures (Kesby, 2007). They detail the difficulty of ensuring children's privacy in the research process during fieldwork with children on the impact of AIDS in Malawi and Lesotho because of the continuous presence of an 'uninvited audience', but assert that it would have been ethically or culturally inappropriate to conduct the research with children in private in that context.

Along with issues of power, a second area of concern is the representation of children's 'voice' in research. A growing interrogation of the process of research with children has highlighted the essentialising of children's voices (Elden, 2012), diminishing the 'messiness' and general problems of representation of children's 'authentic' voices (Spyrou, 2011). Spyrou (2011) argues that moving from a preoccupation with children's 'authentic' voice to one of critical reflexive representation requires us to focus more on the process producing those voices involving power dynamics as well as the broader cultural, societal, ideological

and institutional influences and how children's voices are heard and represented. Alanen (1992), similarly, contends that we need to move beyond the search for authentic voice and instead acknowledge the fluidity and diversity of children's positions.

The significance of child voice and the complexity associated with representing it indicates the importance of the process of eliciting the multi-voiced character of children's interactions. Efforts have focused on recording the non-verbal in research interactions with children (Spyrou, 2011), the use of mixed methods (Hill, 2006; Quiroz et al., 2014), the researcher adopting a 'least-adult' role or a familiar figure for the child participants (Warming, 2011), the use of children as co-researchers (Kellett, 2010) and various strategies around capacity building of child participants (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012) as well as building research relationships (Warming, 2011).

Practical applications of representing children's contributions include a focus on the non-verbal in research with children. Warming (2011) makes the point that while speech is still the dominant means of communication and representation in research with children, some children's voices and perspectives are not being heard and recognized. This is especially the case for younger children and children with disabilities as well as in societies where children are not expected to speak publicly, reflecting more general assumptions about capacity in these groups of children (Ansell et al., 2012). Elden (2012) highlights the value of reflexive and creative research which recognises the 'multivoicedness' of children (Komulainen, 2007). However, Warming argues that even with a wide range of interaction activities, some

children's perspectives are not adequately represented. Spyrou (2011), in this regard, argues for going beyond the voiced and attending to silences in research with children.

Researchers have also attempted to address the complexities of research with children and achieve deeper participation through the use of mixed methods (Hill, 2006). The mixing of methods (as in our study which combined visual, interactive exercises and games), generates multi-layered, richly textured information (Gabb, 2009) and as Quiroz et al., (2014: 212) note 'multiple modalities of expression in child-centred research empower children by promoting their participation in the production of oral and visual texts'.

Researchers have also attempted to elicit children's 'voice' through undertaking research on more equal terms, to 'stretch the limits of the generational order' (Johansson, 2012). This is done through techniques including 'queering the relationship between the researcher and researched' (McClelland and Fine, 2008), the adoption of a 'least adult role' (Mandell, 1991) where researchers 'participate in the children's everyday lives in as childlike a way as possible: playing with the children, submitting to the authority of their adult carers, abdicating from adult authority and privileges' (Warming, 2011: 42) or becoming a 'familiar figure' for whom the children do not feel the need to behave in special ways (Mayall, 2008).

Issues of representation and power have also been addressed through the use of children as co-researchers to provide an 'insider perspective' (Spyrou, 2011) where children are involved in some or all key stages of the research process from identifying research questions, deciding on methods, collecting data, analysing and interpreting data to disseminating the research findings. Yet, even this is problematic (Hopkins, 2008) and brings

with it all of the challenges in conducting research with children. Other techniques in achieving deeper participation include 'capacity building' through training children in research methods of data collection and analysis or working with children on their understanding of the substantive issues under investigation in the research project (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). Finally, children's perspectives are not fixed and essential, but rather fluid and performative (Warming, 2011) and so the need for revisiting and building research relationships with children rather than parachuting in to 'do' interviews with children is emphasised. But, even with all of these efforts to deal with the challenges, we have to accept that interactions with children in research are still unequal and that accurate representation of their 'multi-voicedness' is challenging.

Some thoughts on child participatory research

I am focusing for the remainder of this article on a small number of aspects of the research methods utilised in our study as they relate to the challenges of power and representation identified in the literature on children's participatory research methods. Firstly, the use of children's advisory groups as a way of grounding the research in the lives of children and achieving deeper participation. Secondly, given that participatory research methods are primarily group and often activity focused (Winstone et al., 2014), the issue of 'collective knowledges' and the potential for 'group think' to capture 'authentic' voice. Thirdly, the choice of instruments for data collection & their implementation, specifically the use of visual materials and how these can aid children by removing the adult gaze and helping them to narrativise (Elden, 2012) and represent their daily realities. Finally, the rigidity of

current ethical guidance/controls in research with children in relation to parental consent and how these can potentially reinforce the power of adults as gatekeepers.

Deep participation and the role of child and youth advisory groups

'Deep participation' could be defined as that which involves young people in formulating the research questions and broad shape of the methodology right through to analysis and dissemination of the findings (Ansell et al., 2012). It is participation which is 'done properly, deeply and is driven by the participants themselves' (Kesby, 2007: 2814). This study does not meet all of the criteria for 'deep' participation because it was commissioned by a Government agency to meet specific objectives, it had a limited timeframe linked to the funding, as well as being constrained by our reliance on schools in recruiting some of our participants. However, we did attempt to mitigate these through our work with child and youth advisory groups (CYAG's) from immediately after the research was commissioned through to the data analysis stage.

A key feature of the study was the establishment of CYAGs who worked alongside the adult researchers. Hopkins (2008) highlights the need to consider creative ways of involving children throughout the research process where they can contribute to discussions about how best to approach particular aspects of the overall project. As in Lundy and McEvoy (2012), the children in our CYAGs were invited to participate on the basis of the expertise they could bring to the research team in terms of their contemporary experience as a child in a similar peer group to the research participants (7-12 year olds and 12-17 year olds). Their involvement ensured that the project maintained its focus on decision-making issues

that were important or of concern to children and young people. The CYAG role involved helping the research team to decide on key themes for exploration in group interviews, trialling/piloting some of the proposed ice breakers and child-centred data collection methods and, contributing to the analysis process by working with the raw data generated from the focus group interviews and thereby potentially diminishing problems with representation of participants' voice. In this way the children were both informants and researchers (Jones, 2004). Given the increasingly complex and demanding funding mechanisms and time constraints in research, the tendency for parachuting in and out of children's worlds in order to quickly 'collect data' and analyse data (Spyrou, 2011: 157) may be exacerbated. The CYAG, then, is an aspect of participatory research with children which may have the potential to contribute to deeper participation and merits further exploration and research.

Group methods

The value of group discussions in participatory research with children includes that children are accountable to their peers and engage in dynamic conversations that shape the discussion in ways not possible during one-to-one interviews (Hunleth, 2011; ref). Furthermore, the peer support offered in a small group setting may help to redress the power imbalance that exists between adult and child in one-to-one interviews (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). Ultimately group interviews produce what Ansell et al., (2012: 175) refer to as 'collective knowledges' (those presented as a general truth that extend beyond a particular moment). While these can be immensely valuable, 'consensus narratives' or 'group think' is a characteristic aspect of such collective knowledge production (Yuen, 2004).

Ansell et al., (2012) outline evidence of peer group cultures and dynamics in the research process which exclude individual voices and recount strategies employed by some children in their research including copying from one another and providing accounts which reflected social norms rather than direct experience.

This, undoubtedly, occurred in our group interviews, for example, in one incident during a meeting with the children's advisory group (aged 7 to 12) early in the project we asked participants about issues of importance to children in terms of their decision-making and asked them to identify these with post-its placed on a wall. Bedtime, meals, homework, television and holidays were all raised as important issues for negotiation. During the discussion one young boy spoke about the fact that the family did not watch television during the week and this was responded to with laughter by the rest of the group. He immediately removed his coloured sticky note from the board and for the remainder of the discussion, despite our efforts, this boy participated very little. It appeared that his credibility in the group had been undermined because he did not fit the norm. Some of our strategies to respond to the challenge of group think in interviews included careful management of discussion and the use of proxy questions to reduce the tendency for socially acceptable and desirable answers, for example, 'do you think children of your age…?' (Davey et al., 2010). Also, data collection questions were asked during the on-task chatter of interactive activities using the floor mats (Figure 1) or while 'twiddle objects' such as colourful pipe cleaners were used in order to deflect the glare of researcher and peer attention.

Visual methods

Visual and activity focused methods have been demonstrated as being especially useful in research with children through assisting on the reflection of complex ideas or issues, making the process more enjoyable, offering a different way of revealing experiences and perspectives while at the same time democratically involving children as 'producers of knowledge' (Elden, 2012; Winstone et al., 2014;). Information is understood more easily visually than through narrative (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014), producing or engaging with images is part of children's everyday lives and is experienced as fun, relaxing and enables the abstract become concrete (Elden, 2012). Visual and tactile methods including pictures to support vignettes, visual timetables, 'talking mats' and photographs are essential to enable younger groups and children with cognitive and communication difficulties to contribute and have been used with some success (for example Gabbs emotion-map method, 2009; Clarks mosaic approach, 2001; Winstone et al.'s self-portrait and mirror work with children with autism, 2014 and Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam's use of objects and tactile versions of charts for visually impaired children in the Global South, 2014). This is important in itself in terms of the reachability of research and ensuring deeper participation given the preceding discussion on power dynamics and lesser heard voices in research with children.

In our study, one of the many challenges encountered was developing suitable methods to meaningfully engage with a broad range of children and young people from seven to seventeen years of age and so we developed quite different methods for exploring similar issues of participation and decision making. With the younger group (seven to twelve year

olds), which included children with specific learning needs, the process was supported by visuals including floor mats prompting discussion of children's participation in different settings. Three laminated interactive floor mats were used in conjunction with a focus group discussion schedule. Each floor mat depicted one of the spaces of inquiry - home, school and community. Using wipeable pens the children were asked to draw, on the respective mat, places of importance in their daily lives. They were also asked to map where children spend time, where decision-making discussions happened, what kinds of issues were discussed, who the decisions were discussed with, and how much of a say children had in decisions made. This data unfolded informally supported by the researchers' facilitation, which stayed with the interests of the children and was not prescriptive.

Figure 1: Home, School and Community floor mats

Mitchell and Elwood (2012) see mapping as a political act which locates individual politics and agency everywhere and note the gradual acceptance of this view of mapping the broader contextual world and social relationships emphasising the communicative process. The children in our study mapped and discussed everyday concerns such as the location of favourite spaces in their school, and the best places to play in their local area. Through this process they communicated the rules of the school and their relationship to these, which they experienced as unsatisfactory and based on limited representative structures such as student councils. They also gave an insight into some of the local power relations in which they are involved and the ways in which they navigate these, mainly through their involvement in youth clubs or activities. Our experience was that, while the floor mats were useful starting points for discussion, some of the children spent a lot of time trying to locate

their ‘spaces’ on the mat and using these as geographical representations of their ‘spaces’ at home, in their school and their local community. It soon became obvious that there is no easy way of engaging and focusing the children, but rather the maps offered a useful way in to the discussion.

Another implication of using the mats alongside other methods was that differences can emerge in the findings from different methods, as discussed by Quiroz et al., (2014: 220) who question whether children’s ‘maps presented opportunities to mentally expand on place-making while their photographs captured the spatial limitations of their worlds’. In our study, the children’s community mats showed a sense of community which expanded beyond the local area to places quite a distance from their home but of importance in their lives such as a weekly dance club. In this way the mapping facilitated a way of representing their movement and their often blurred boundaries of ‘community’, with children using the margins of the mat to identify spaces they utilise outside their local area. Our initial reading of this was that the younger children perhaps did not fully understand the concept of ‘community’, but on reflection they were describing their community as not necessarily limited to the local. In the group discussion, however, there was evidence of constraints in engaging with the community in terms of limited mobility in their everyday journeys which were often reduced to home and school because of parental concerns regarding safety as well as money and transport issues.

Ethical considerations

The importance of thinking carefully about ethical and methodological issues at all stages of the research process, from planning through consent to dissemination, is well established (Greene and Hogan 2005; Harcourt et al., 2011). The increasing rigidity in ethical requirements, in particular whether parental consent must always be a part of the consent process for young people engaging in research, is relevant in light of the child participatory discourse emphasising children's rights and agency.

More rigorous ethics regarding children's participation in research are welcome, however, some question the dominance and rigidity of ethical committees and rules (Parsons et al., 2015). Social research emphasises the active involvement of participants, concern about risks of research, and broadening the scope of attention to ethics from data collection to include every stage of research from planning through to dissemination (Alderson, 2012). While this contribution to ethical procedures and practices has been noted, some have argued that ethical guidance is still strongly based on and informed by a medical model (Coyne, 2010). Skelton (2008) talks of experiencing a political and ethical tension between the 'adultist' guidance and policy on consent and the conceptual perspectives on childhood framing her research and calls for a revision of understandings about consent. One of the key ways this tension presented in our study was in the requirements around parental consent.

Coyne (2010) outlines a number of problematic assumptions within parental consent – that children cannot understand what they are consenting to; that parents can evaluate risks and benefits of research; and that children may agree to research in order to please adults. She

asks whether parental consent is always required, for example, in the case of minimal risk research and where research relates to services that children are accessing without parental consent. In one of our research settings, a second level school Principal assured us that there was no need to request individual consent from parents or children as there was blanket consent signed by parents for all such activities at the beginning of the school year. We insisted on this being completed as it was part of the approval process agreed with the Ethics committee at the University. However, given that the nature and focus of the study was children's participation and decision-making, a tension arises in the process of seeking the consent of parents for older children's involvement.

Ethical procedures are crucial to developing ethical literacy in research practitioners and of paramount importance to the research process but we need to interrogate further the potential for overly paternalistic/child protectionist frameworks adopted by ethical review bodies to hamper participatory research processes and reinforce adult-child power inequities especially in the field of child participatory research founded on the concept of children as agentic. We also need to reflect on the critical importance of child consent in its own right, which places the final decision at the point of participation with the child themselves, and to developing researchers' capacity in this area with much good practice already evident (Kellett, 2010).

Conclusion

Child participatory research framed by childhood studies, the UNCRC and the conceptualisation of children as relational beings, has grown in use. With this expansion, key challenges have been identified in the literature related to power inequalities and representation of children's voices in such research. This article discusses aspects of a participatory research project with children and young people in Ireland in light of this problematisation. Deep participation is somewhat of a misnomer in that all research with children is unequal and usually framed by agendas constructed by adults. However, I argue that, despite an acceptance that we cannot eradicate power inequities in research with children, we can acknowledge and aim to minimise these through adopting a 'lesser adult role' as researchers, building capacity in children through the research process and interrogating ethical issues such as parental consent. Furthermore, efforts to ensure the representation of children's 'voice' in research through carefully planned group activities, the use of visual methods and children and youth advisory groups are examined. To conclude, child participatory research has much potential which has not yet been mined and attending to the challenges discussed has the potential to contribute to 'deeper' participation.

Notes

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