AN EXPLORATION OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS USED BY RESEARCHERS WHEN RESEARCHING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

L. Bowers (2017) UCD School of Education
AIMS OF THE STUDY

Articles 9, 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) position children as active social agents who have the right to participate in, be consulted and express their views freely in all matters that concern them. While participatory research with children in general is increasing, it is not as widespread in research conducted with young children. The aim of this study was to explore:

1. How the UNCRC discourse surrounding children’s rights has filtered into the research being conducted with young children?

2. How have articles 9, 12 and 13 of the UNCRC been implemented by researchers when conducting studies with young children?
I wanted to investigate the extent of young children’s participation in research which involved or included young children.

To do this I had to frame the study; decide on criteria; and find a way to make the data meaningful.

For the purpose of the study I had to define what I meant by ‘young’ children. According to the literature young children are defined as those from birth to eight years of age (Young, 1996) or until the child starts compulsory schooling which is at age six in Ireland (French, 2007; Langston, Abbott, Lewis, & Kellett, 2004). The majority of the children in the research papers reviewed, 87% \( n=139 \) were aged 6 years or under.
Method

The study employed a qualitative analytical approach to a focussed content analysis of published research papers in three journals over a three year timeframe, 2014 - 2016. This produced 308 research papers from the following journals.

1. The European Early Childhood Education Research Journal
2. The Journal of Early Childhood Research
3. Early Years: An International Research Journal
Each research paper was examined initially to find out who the research participants were. This focus allowed a number of research papers to be discounted as they did not contain any children as participants but rather included either adults only or were document analyses. The remaining papers were further analysed using an analysis table to record the data. Close attention was paid to:

- the research approach used;
- the primary reason for the research;
- what role young children played in the study;
- how or if consent/assent was obtained from young children;
- what methodologies were used;
- and any limitations or recommendations mentioned by the original researcher or noticed by the present researcher.
In total 308 research papers were examined. Of these 48%, \( n=149 \) were discounted from further analysis as they did not included children within the research. The remaining 52% \( n=159 \) included children as participants. Children were included either as subjects of the study or as an object (tool) used to evaluate a process, an intervention, or an adults’ performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Early Childhood Education Research Journal</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Early Childhood Research</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years: An International Journal of Research &amp; Development</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Preliminary Analyses of Research Papers
To measure children’s participation each study was placed on Hart’s Ladder of Participation.

The rungs on Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation are numbered from 1 to 8, with rungs 1, 2 and 3 grouped and labelled as non-participation. Rungs 4 to 8 are grouped and labelled degrees of participation.
Rungs 1-3 = **non-participation**.

Signifying that although labelled as participatory research with children the studies were in fact non-participatory. The majority of the research papers reviewed, **65%** \( \{n=103\} \), occupy these rungs.

Rungs 4-8 = **degrees of participation**.

Signifying young children’s active meaningful participation. The minority of the research papers reviewed, **35%** \( \{n=56\} \), occupy these rungs. With the majority of these, **21%** \( \{n=34\} \) situated on level 4.
Level on Hart's Ladder of Participation for Research Studies reviewed - % of overall

- Non-participation: 21%
- Degrees of participation:
  - Rung 1-3: 65%
  - Rung 4: 6%
  - Rung 5: 8%
  - Rung 6: 0%
  - Rung 7-8: 0%
What commonality did the studies which attained higher rungs on the ladder of participation have?
Plurality of Methodologies (Mosaic Approach)

Many of the research papers reviewed use an array of methodologies to collect data rather than relying on just one data generating method. Lipponen et al (2015) set out to explore the foundations of visual methods used in research with children who were five to six years of age. Their study made reference to Clark’s Mosaic approach and stated that “if children have the right to participate in social life, they should also have the right to express their opinions and experience when they participate in research” (Lipponen, Rajala, Hilppö, & Paananen, 2015, p. 937). To this end they employed several different data collection methods. These included photographs taken, and drawings created by the children. These artefacts were used to prompt discussion during conversations between the children and the researcher “as they offer a point of shared interest” (Lipponen, Rajala, Hilppö, & Paananen, 2015, p. 940). They also videoed the children and viewed the video with the children which again generated discussion which further contextualised the data.

Rung 5: Consulted and Informed: Where children act as consultants to projects which are controlled by adults.
Plurality of Methodologies

Howe (2016) in her study which was exploring children’s perspectives on play in school invited children to take her on a tour of their school during which the children took “photographs of things that were important to them and these photographs formed a basis of subsequent discussions with me” (Howe, 2016, p. 251).

Rung 6: Adult Initiated, Shared Decision with Children: Projects initiated by the adult but the child has meaningful input in to the decision making process.
The school tour approach was also employed by Fleer and Li (2016) in their study which investigated children’s perspectives when external agencies come in to the early years setting to evaluate it. The researchers took considerable time to put in place a five point model which they believed would enable children to express their views. The model included; building an initial relationship with children by explaining through a dramatization of a story the reason they needed the children’s participation; an awareness of power relations by using video observations to determine “how and if children were being positioned with agency and authority about their kindergarten during the research” (Fleer & Li, 2016, p. 348); the use of a range of effective tools for collecting children’s own meanings, motives and views; giving children time to think about things without being pressurised to come up with an answer; using the photographs and drawings the children made as a shared point of discussion.

**Rung 6: Adult Initiated, Shared Decision with Children:** Projects initiated by the adult but the child has meaningful input in to the decision making process.
Plurality of Methodologies

Many of the research papers used elements of the Mosaic Approach rather than the full suite of features. Those studies which used the Mosaic approach in its entirety stated this was their intention. These studies came from a position of viewing and appreciating the child as an expert on his/her own childhood. Whereas the studies which used elements of the Mosaic approach referred to suitting their methodology to the capabilities of the child, and not wanting to disrupt the child’s day in the Early Years setting.
What commonality did the studies which attained lower rungs on the ladder of participation have?
Single Methodology

The majority of the research papers reviewed relied on one methodology such as observing children in their early years setting. Some of these studies included semi structured interviews with parents or teachers to gain insight into the world of the child. This insight was second-hand as it was not directly obtained from the children themselves but through the adult. It should be noted that this type of methodology has its place in research with infants who have not developed the capacity to communicate their thoughts and opinions.

Sharma et al (2014) in their multiple interpretive case study looked at how infant educators understood and assisted, very young children to develop social capabilities and peer relationships. By using video observations of infants engaging in play and routine activities as prompts to focus discussion during interviews with the infant educators, the researchers gained insight into the thoughts and prejudices the infant educators had of the child’s social capabilities and the role they as the adult had played in assisting or impeding this development.

**Rung 1: Manipulation** Where the adult includes the child for their own purposes.
Evang and Øverlien (2014) used semi structured one to one interviews with children aged four to seven. The researchers noted their study would have yielded richer data if “the interviews had been video-recorded [and] other modes of data collection, such as the use of photographs, or picture-aided interviews” (Evang & Øverlien, 2014, p. 123) had been utilised. The researchers took the decision not to alter their data collection methods to take account of the age of the child which further curtailed the quality of data they collected.

**Rung 1: Manipulation:** Where the adult includes the child for their own purposes.
Objectifying Children

A significant number of research papers utilised children as test subjects. The research paper by Kim and Lee (2016) serves as an illustration of how compartmentalised and divorced from the reality of the everyday lives of children many of these studies tend to be. Kim and Lee’s (2016) research entailed evaluating the gross motor development of children aged five to six. Although the tests the researcher wanted the children to do were demonstrated and explained to the children, one needs to question whether the decision to weigh children “in minimal clothing” (Kim & Lee, 2016, p. 931) and the recommendation by the researcher that “additional measures of overweight and obesity, such as skinfold thickness may provide more accurate data regarding the amount of body fat” (Kim & Lee, 2016, p. 933) contravene the child’s right to be treated humanely and with respect.

Rung 1: Manipulation: Where the adult includes the child for their own purposes.
Findings

The research studies reviewed demonstrate that the rights of the child as expressed in articles, 9, 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (1989) are not uniformly upheld. They are often dependent on the type of data collection method utilised. The reliance of one data collection method can curtail the ability of the child to participate meaningfully. Whereas a plurality of data collection methods can create the optimal conditions necessary for the child to express his/her views. Research studies which objectify children by treating them as a test subjects do little to promote the rights of the child.
Findings

It is interesting to note in 2016 one of the journals used in this analysis, the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, felt it necessary to issue their own ethical code for early childhood research. This ethical code is being used as a guiding framework by the journal. Researchers are obliged to adhere to it if they wish the journal to publish their work. The rationale and principals for the ethical code are as follows:

We believe that Early Childhood researches should have an ethic of respect for:
1) the child, family, community and society;
2) democratic values;
3) justice and equity;
4) knowing from multiple perspectives;
5) integrity, transparency and respectful interactions;
6) quality and rigour;
7) academic scholarship;
8) social contribution.
Findings

The UNCRC discourse surrounding children’s rights has, and is increasingly filtering into the research being conducted with young children. But it is not uniform and not considered by all to be a necessary element of the research process. Consequently it is in danger of being either overlooked, or treated as something which is optional rather than mandatory. More and continual pressure needs to be applied by universities and research publishers to ensure young children’s rights are upheld in the research process; that methodologies are used to enable young children exercise their rights; and that researchers are challenged to be cognisant of their responsibilities to young children including adherence to ethical standards; and to the research community in general.
Life World of the Child

As van Manen (1990) indicated “the life world of the child has different experiential qualities from the life world of the adult” (p. 84) the worlds of the adult and the child are similar but also quite different.

Things which made sense to us as children are no longer relevant to the adult who has lost the understanding he/she had as a child.
The graphic above structures these worlds into a solar system. In the middle is the adult world around which the child worlds orbit. The adult world holds all the power; it decides the fate of the child worlds. Like a sun it gives life and controls the environment.
Life World of the Child

It is for this reason that the Mosaic Method is significant when researching with children. This is especially true for young children who may not perceive the world as adults do or have yet to develop the ability to communicate in a way adults can readily understand without a significant risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation on the adults’ part. If we are to gain insight into the child’s world we need to appreciate children as the experts they are in their world and implement methodologies which offer the best hope of bridging the adult child divide.

No one said it would be easy

As the following photographs illustrate the world looks different when you look at it from a child’s perspective.
References


Bowers, L (2014) ‘A critical exploration of participatory research methods employed by researchers in conducting research with young children’, MSc in Children & Youth Studies, UCD, Dublin, Ireland


