

Researching with Children and Young People: Transcript



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Niamh O'Brien: Hello. My name is Niamh O'Brien and I am an Associate Professor of Social Inclusion and Young People at Anglia Ruskin University, and I'm here today to speak to you about researching with children and young people. So, we're first going to talk about the position of children and young people in research. So, children and young people have been positioned as the objects, subjects and participants of research. Traditionally, research was done on children and young people, but this stage has shifted to research with children and young people and then to research by children and young people. At the end of the last century, children were being seen as having human rights of their own as well as being actors in research and in wider society, and this was evident in the development of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child, as well as the new sociology of childhood. So, how children are considered in research as objects, subjects, participants, and indeed co-researchers, reflects and shapes the way they are positioned within a society. So, children are an important source of knowledge about their own experiences, yet traditionally adults have muted these voices or not sought them at all. This goes back to the idea of research on children rather than with children, and in the same guise opportunities to participate are often decided by adults.

So, in terms of whose voices get heard, but this continues to be a problem for many social researchers. And it's not because we want to hear from the most articulate or the most able, but constraints of time and resource can impact this. So, we need to consider where we are accessing the participants for our research. Schools are associated with a power hierarchy, so creativity around recruitment and ensuring the process is open to all who want to be involved is important. Of course, some researchers argue away from recruiting in school

where possible and to access children and young people in locations where they themselves feel a bit more powerful, such as youth clubs and groups. Here, children and young people might also feel more able to dissent if they so wish.

Powell and Smith argue that the biggest barrier to children's participation is the need in every case for an adult to consent to their participation. And children and young people have spoken about their frustration with the consent process. They feel their right to participate in something meaningful to them is denied and they're not afforded the privilege of deciding for themselves if they want to be involved. When I was doing my PhD research, which used participatory action research to explore bullying in a fee-paying day and boarding school, anecdotally I had heard stories of students who wanted to take part but did not want their parents to know for fear of them finding out about their experiences of bullying versus any sacrifices that had been made for their school fees. After this, I worked at the school and university ethics committee to gain blanket consent from the head teacher for all students. Parents were informed of the study, that the study was happening and could contact me with any queries, and this ensured that students could make up their own mind about whether they wanted to consent or not, which supported autonomy and agency. But this approach, however, is not universal across institutions and it is problematic, particularly in sensitive research, where young people might not want their parents to know about certain situations, such as bullying, or question their gender or sexuality, for example.

Canosa and colleagues in 2018 suggest that we need to consider whose interests are being met when we make such changes. Are they in consideration of the children or young people that we want to involve, or is this change more suitable for increasing our own recruitment. So, respecting children and young people that they have the right to not participate, and we do need to respect this, we need to take note of dissenting voices and silences because this could be a potential resistance to adult-centric work, so there's certainly a need to consider that.

Finally, adult and child power relations. So, power differentials are inevitable in research involving children and adults, and often this can take quite a lot of time to work through. Going back to my PhD research, the co-researchers that I worked with insisted at the beginning on calling me Mrs O'Brien. I asked them to call me Niamh as I was not a teacher in the school and they responded saying, "Oh, no, they won't like that here". But as the weeks went on, they eventually did call me Niamh, and this was one attempt to try to lessen the power dynamics that were naturally there. Otherwise, this can be alleviated by how we approach entering the child world. Mandell's least adult role advocates that the researcher relinquish all adult descriptors, except their physical size, to enter into a child's world as active, fully participating members. But this idea had been debated in the literature. But we need to consider whether the children and young people we work with really see us as least adult. So, going back to my own research on the whole idea of Mrs.

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Another example from my work, I was working on a study exploring bullying and self-exclusion from school. My colleague, Anna Dadswell, and I co-created the research questions with a group of young people attending an alternative education provision. This provision has centres scattered across the south of England, and part of the methodology was for us to talk to as many students attending these centres as we possibly could, so we opted to use a focus group. On one occasion we arrived at a centre, which was about two hours away from us, and a member of staff greeted us and said that some young people had changed their mind about participating and they wanted to meet with us first before they decided to get involved in the group. So, I suppose here they were demonstrating that they want to participant on their own terms, which was wonderful. So, we all met together and had an informal chat where they asked us some questions about the research, but they also wanted to get a feel for who we were. We must have passed the test because they did agree to participate in the focus group.

So, finally, we need to consider diversity in childhood. The methods we use to research children's perspective need to be mindful, not only of age and understanding, but the wider culture and traditions of a community and possibly how adults are viewed. This can be challenging where children and young people are expected to be obedient and not question adults. Often these issues need to be navigated carefully so children and young people are not placed in vulnerable positions. Using creative methods of involvement, such as Post-It notes or suggestion boxes, can encourage participation but less reliance on children and young people being vocal.

So, I'm just going to leave you with a reference list and some suggested reading, so feel free to work your way through that. Thank you.

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