

“Why haven’t I got one of those?” A consideration regarding the need to protect non-participant children in early years research.

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Abstract (150-200 words)

It is widely documented that young children participating in research should be protected from harm and that ethical considerations should be applied throughout a research project. What this paper strives to assert however, is that protecting these participants is insufficient. A research project into children’s speech and language development, using audio-visual methods, highlighted that children who are non-participants, those on the periphery of the research, can also be affected by the research process. It is acknowledged throughout this paper that although ethical procedures were adhered to whilst undertaking a specific research project, this was insufficient. It is therefore argued that all children within a research environment, whether participatory or not, should be given equal consideration with regards to ethical protection when undertaking research. It is asserted that “why haven’t I got one of those”, or the equivalent, is a phrase to be avoided at all costs when undertaking research with children.

Key words: ethics, early childhood, non-participant, maleficence, audio-visual methods

Introduction

When undertaking research with young children it is acknowledged that specific emphasis is needed regarding ethical considerations because, as O’Reilly *et al.* (2013) argue, children

have a vulnerability in two ways. Firstly, O'Reilly *et al.* (2013) assert, children have a vulnerability due to their weakness in their limited intellect and cognitive ability, and in their physicality and, secondly, they have an added vulnerability which is due to their lack of power in the world. It is suggested that this lack of power and reduced knowledge can put young children into situations, within research, that are not appropriate, should the lack of ethical consideration be made.

This paper discusses research that was centred around young children, and the ethical considerations that were made prior to, and during the research process. The research involved recording children's speech, with the intention of analysing speech quality (Richardson and Murray, 2016), through the use of clip on microphones attached to dictaphones. Due to the age of the children who were participants, being four and five year olds, the ethical issues needed in depth exploration and consideration. This ethical caution was applied (BERA, 2011; EECERA, 2015), however it transpired at transcription stage that even this most thorough approach was insufficient.

What is highlighted throughout this paper is that although ethical considerations were thought to be thorough, and actions were thoughtfully applied in order to keep this impact to a minimum, it transpired that an impact was still prevalent. This aligns therefore with the Hawthorne effect (Dickson and Roethlisberger, 2003) which recognises that it is not possible to undertake research without any impact whatsoever. Nutbrown (2010:11) suggests that striving to protect participants is insufficient in itself and that a culture of 'caring, vigilance, sensitivity and fidelity' should be applied during any research project. What needs to be remembered, at all times, is that:

The lives and stories that we hear and study, are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us.

Denzin, 1989:83

What this research project highlighted, and hence what is extremely important here, is that the ‘lives and stories’ that can be heard may not purely those of the participants, but those also in the vicinity. This paper will therefore discuss how ethical protection was provided to all participants within a specific research project but how these considerations needed extending to ALL children within the research environment. It will be argued throughout this paper that considering protecting participants from harm is insufficient and that it should be general practice that consideration is given to all those involved – even those indirectly so.

Background and project context

A research study was undertaken into how children’s speech and language varied within different learning environments (Richardson and Murray, 2016). This case-study research was carried out in a reception class in a large town in the East Midlands area of England, meaning the age range of the participants were four to five years old.

Ethical guidelines were adhered to, in that permissions were sought from participating children, their parents, practitioners and setting leaders (BERA, 2011; EECERA, 2015), by way of permission letters and ongoing consent (Harcourt and Sargeant, 2011). Data was collected using recording devices; small microphones that were clipped to the children’s clothes, with the recording device being placed in their pocket, and then left to record. At

the pilot stage of the research these dictaphones proved problematic as they kept falling out of pockets when the children were physically active. This problem was alleviated by putting the recording devices into small backpacks and the children then wore the backpacks without any problem (Richardson and Murray, 2016).

Vignettes of speech were randomly selected for analysis using Type/Token ratio analysis (Richards, 1987). The aim was that the speech for analysis was naturally occurring, with limited researcher interference (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2013) and this meant that the recording devices were activated and left to record for several hours at a time. The aim of undertaking these audio observations in this manner was that an 'ecological approach' was adopted (Fawcett, 1996:13); alternatively known as the 'naturalistic approach', with the aim being that the children forgot that the devices were present and their speech was therefore as naturalistic as possible.

The fact that the children had these devices visibly clipped to their person was what caused the ethical dilemma. Although the aim was for the participants to forget that these dictaphones were there, what resulted was that other children, those not participating in the research, were heard at transcription saying repeatedly, "why haven't I got one of those?"

Whilst undertaking the analysis of the transcriptions it was noted that the participating children were often asked, by other children, what the recording devices were for. When questioned by other children, phrases such as the following were heard:

"I have to wear it. Cos that visitor said. The visitor said I have to." (Child 1, week 1)

"Because I'm going to forest school. I need to keep the thing dry. The machine. I have to wear it. The lady gave them to us." (Child 2, week 3)

“Because it’s for forest school. It’s for forest school and I do it today” (Child 4, week 2)

The excerpts above indicate that, although the backpacks went some way to alleviating the issue of the microphones being prominent, the other children in the environment continued to question the presence of the devices and the microphones. It is also noticeable from these excerpts that this recognition carried on throughout the four week study. The aim of the habituation process and children accepting that the microphones were part of the process, did not appear to occur as expected. The children remained aware of the microphones throughout the whole of the four-week research period.

It is therefore argued that the occurrence of this repeated phrase, “why haven’t I got one of those?” could not only have interfered with the naturalistic approach to the research but that also this could also contravene ethical guidelines. It should be questioned how this impacts on the children not chosen to be participants. The “why haven’t I got one of those?” phrase could indicate that these children are feeling somewhat inferior in this process and it could therefore be argued that the concept of non-maleficence has not been considered fully. It is argued that this consideration should not be applied in isolation to this research project, but to all research that involves children. This will be discussed further as this paper continues.

Ethical considerations when researching with young children – what does the literature say?

The issue of power

As previously mentioned, children have a vulnerability in research that should be both acknowledged and protected against. It is acknowledged (Nolan *et al.*, 2013) that the same protection and rights that are afforded to adults should be provided to children. This ‘ethical symmetry’ (Christensen and Prout, 2002:482), being the association between the researcher and the participants, should be alike irrespective of whether the research participant is an adult or a child. However, it could be asserted that the considerations around ethics should be intensified when including young children in research, due to the issues of vulnerability that O’Reilly *et al.* (2013) deliberate. It is alleged that children should not be perceived as the equivalent to, neither distinctive to, adults (Punch, 2002); instead they should be viewed as on a continuum, which can differ dependant on the individual concerned and other factors that require reflexivity, determined by the nature of the research, the situation and the environment.

When young children, are to be included in this research, it is noted that it is necessary to seek parental permission at the outset (BERA, 2011). MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) recognise that, historically, it has been sufficient to seek parental consent before including children in research and Balen *et al.* (2006:29) concur by alleging that parents are in fact the ‘gatekeepers’ for these children. Conversely, Nutbrown (2010:10) disputes this concept and states that, instead, parents should be viewed as ‘guardians’. These guardians, Nutbrown argues, should be viewed as protecting children from harm, and not be regarded as gatekeepers with the sole responsibility or allowing others to opt in and out of children’s lives as they see fit. Whether viewing parents as guardians or gatekeepers however, it is argued that by purely requesting permission from parents, for their children to partake in research, that this is in contravention of Article 12 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). Article 12 states that a child has the right to voice their views and opinion on matters that involve them. Although this is not a legal requirement, it is argued that it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher. However, gaining this permission at outset is recognised as being insufficient in isolation. When undertaking research with young children it is argued that it is essential that the whole process is explained to them, in a way that can be understood, and the implications of participating are explained as far as can be possible. The British Educational Research Authority (BERA) (2011) allege that children should be made aware that they can refuse to participate in the research, at any time during the process, and they should feel no duress to participate in the project.

Conversely to the right set out by Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), that each child should be able to voice their opinions and views, it is asserted that a child's voice can only be heard and noted if permitted by an adult, when being involved in research. Research that has been designed by an adult and is only carried out after parental permission has been sought, is indeed giving children the opportunity to express their opinions and views, however only once the adult has granted permission for this to occur (Gallagher and Gallagher, 2008). This, Foucault (1989) argues, is because of power and the power that an adult has over a child can be viewed as 'a commodity to be acquired, exchanged, shared and relinquished at will' (Gallagher and Gallagher, 2008:502). Research projects that involve children and include children as participants, it is argued, is generally *done to* children, rather than *done with* children (Hill *et al.*, 1996) and this can present some issues when considering the balance of power. Graham *et al.* (2016) discuss the complexity of power dynamics when undertaking research with young children and acknowledge that this notion is one which can cause difficulties throughout the research process. Children should be able to feel that they

have a choice regarding participation, they should not feel pressurised into participating, because it is adults that are requesting that they participate and adults normally make the rules. Dockett *et al.* (2012a:253) appreciate that children can find it extremely problematic to express dissent within an early years environment, 'where adults have entrenched power' and although it is argued that it will never be possible to totally overcome this, it should be regarded as essential that children are given the option to withdraw from any research without feeling pressurised into continuing. Mauthner (1997) alleges that it may never be possible to overcome this power dynamic, due to the differences in age and thus the perceived power that adult asserts over a child. It is argued therefore, that an element of power dynamic will impact upon all research undertaken by adults when children are participating. What is therefore important is that all reasonable steps are taken to minimise the impact of this power dynamic.

It is argued that one way that research should strive to combat the issue of an imbalance of power is to ensure that the ethical considerations are an ongoing concern, rather than just being considered at the outset of a project. As a researcher embarks on a project in a setting with which they have no prior connections, it could be argued that children may feel more compliant initially with what is, essentially, a stranger. It could be argued that the process of habituation can provide the opportunity to withdraw, as children become more comfortable and settle into the research process. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) believe that to develop an understanding of ethical complexities it is essential to consider what is not yet known. The need to continually reflect and adapt the research process as necessary, it is asserted, is the only way in which this consideration of the unknown can be achieved. This continuous ethical reflexivity needs to be applied throughout the whole research project and it is argued that this should be the case for the elements of research that involve adults, just as it applies

to children (Cohen *et al.*, 2002). This ‘ethical mindfulness’ (Warin, 2011:810) should therefore be adhered to throughout the whole research process.

Although the issue of power dynamics between adults and children is widely documented (Flewitt, 2005; Coyne, 1998), what appears not to be discussed to a great extent, if at all, is the impact on the power balance between groups of children in this situation. It could be argued that by selecting a specific group of children to partake in research, and thus omitting another group of children, this could impact on the balance of power between peers. Piaget (1932) suggests that children form friendships on a horizontal dimension compared to relationships that they form with adults, which tend to be on a vertical plane. It could be argued that research that singles out participants could upset this equilibrium and in turn upset the power balance between children and their peers. It could be suggested that this horizontal dimension becomes vertical by selecting some and not others and this is an issue that does not appear to have been discussed in literature thus far. It is suggested that this is an ethical dilemma that is extremely difficult to rectify and this may therefore be a reason for lack of theoretical discussion up to this point. It is argued, however, that even though it may be a difficult discussion to have, it is essential that it is considered when planning research.

It is argued that throughout research it is crucial to maintain an ethical stance but also to maintain a moral stance and this will be now further considered.

Ethical responsibility versus moral obligation

At the same time as the ethical considerations concerning power, there also exists a moral obligation to the research participants and it is argued that at times this can cause conflict. What, for example, should a researcher do if they are confided in within a research context

and they have guaranteed confidentiality? This paradox of ethical stance compared to a moral stance is something that obviously needs to be considered by the researcher and it is argued that this conundrum be considered before the research process begins. Judgement should be applied at the time, should anything occur that causes concern, however if these issues have been pre-empted then this becomes so much easier to deal with. Keddie (2000) argues that this issue can put a researcher in a position where they are forced to choose between their validity of data and the moral responsibility to the children concerned.

Although Birbeck and Drummond (2007) allege that it is likely that this kind of dilemma is faced regularly when researching with young children, they also point out, paradoxically, that it is rarely discussed within literature. They assert that this may be because researchers could feel that they had interfered with their data should they intervene. A possible way to overcome this dilemma, Jamison and Gilbert (2000) suggest, would be to consider children as being capable participants in the research process however, at the same time needing protection. It is argued that this should be the case for any research where children are involved, as participants, or by default, as non-participants.

It is recognised that when using audio visual methods for researching with young children, this can cause complications around the issues of privacy and consent. It is noted that by collecting data in this way this can result in data being captured that is beyond the realms of the research question and that children may end up divulging information that they did not wish to share (Skovdal and Abebe, 2012). To a researcher, this then provides a moral obligation. By explaining research to young children, be it by providing a leaflet to children, or using an alternative form of communication, a researcher can explain the implications of the research and can establish expectations; confidentiality, right to withdraw etc. By stating that information will not be shared however, and by promising confidentiality, there exists a safeguarding obligation within this aspect for consideration. If a child was heard to share

information that would put them at risk, or morally needed to be reported, such as an allegation of abuse, then the researcher has an obligation to convey that information to the relevant officer. Although privacy and confidentiality should be promised this is therefore a caveat to this and should be explained to children at outset and prior to each recording, to reiterate the research stance on this. Birbeck and Drummond (2007:27) go so far as to say that if a researcher does not intervene when a child's safety is threatened then this, in itself, is un-ethical, and 'also highly unrealistic in terms of the realities of the social system of childhood'. It should therefore be crucial to view children as able and willing participants, however at the same time keeping in mind that these young children may need protecting if the situation arises (Jamison and Gilbert, 2000). It is argued that it is also necessary to inform the other children involved in the session, those who are non-participants, that audio-visual recording is taking place and an obligation to report exists. It may be that a non-participant child is heard to utter something that can put them, or others at risk, and although they are not directly involved in the research process this indirect involvement would necessitate action. It is argued that all stakeholders should therefore be informed of this. This moral obligation gives greater importance to the need to consider ethical implications for ALL children within a research environment, whether participatory or not.

Findings from research

As previously mentioned, measures were taken when undertaking this research to ensure ethical practice was adhered to and that the findings of the speech and language analysis were as naturalistic as possible. The use of backpacks, and the removal of the cumbersome dictaphones, was thought to alleviate the issue of the Hawthorne Effect (Dickson and Roethlisberger, 2003) and to ensure that children's play and development was unaffected by the research process (Richardson and Murray, 2016). What should be noted here is that when the backpacks were introduced ALL children were given a backpack, with the aim of making

no child feel different or more special than another. What was discovered however, was that the children who were not participating in the research were continually questioning the presence of the microphones and questioning why they had not been given one. This repeated phrase of “why haven’t I got one of those?” was noticeably present throughout the four weeks of research and the responses from the participant children when asked, all indicated that they felt that they HAD to wear the devices, that there was no choice in the matter. Phrases such as the following indicate the element of power that the researcher appears to have in this project:

“I have to wear it. Cos that visitor said. The visitor said I have to.” (Child 1, week 1)

“I have to wear it. The lady gave them to us.” (Child 2, week 3)

The research project aim was to discover if young children’s utterances, their speech and language, was different when playing and learning within different environments and the results of that have been published (Richardson and Murray, 2016) however this ethical conundrum was also discovered and has, as a result, led to much consideration around the ethics of involving children and how this impacts on those children not chosen to participate.

Discussion

When regarding the literature around ‘ethical symmetry’ (Christensen and Prout, 2002:482) it should be deemed, that for the purposes of any research, that each participant should be viewed as an individual and considerations around ethics be applied in a situational manner. What should be noted here however, is that these discussions in literature and the application to the reality of the research, centre around participants. It is argued, that as a result of the

discussions within this paper, that situational application should occur not just to those children who are participants, but to ALL children within the research location.

It has been recognised above that permission from the children who are participating in research should be obtained (BERA, 2011; EECERA, 2015) and again it is argued that this is insufficient. When using audio visual methods of data collection it is extremely likely that other children, and adults, will become involved in the research just by being within the proximity and it is argued that this makes it essential that ALL parties, whether participant or not, have the information that they need to be fully aware of the implications of this.

It has been widely documented about the need to consider the power of relationships and interactions between children and researchers (Flewitt, 2005; Coyne, 1998) and throughout this paper it has been asserted that there also exists a need to consider the issue of power balance between groups of children when researching with children. The data obtained indicated that relationships, and the balance of power, between the participant children and those not selected to be party to the research, could also be affected. The only way to eradicate this issue in this research project would have been to issue every child with a recording device to ensure equality. The disadvantage of this would then be the ethical responsibility of collecting data and not utilising it within research. O'Reilly *et al.* (2013) discuss the ethical considerations of doing no harm to a child when undertaking any form of research and although this case study aimed to ensure that no harm was done to those involved, it could be argued that the children who were not involved were subject to harm, because they were not given microphones and devices as the sample children were. Flewitt (2005) suggests that children should be inclusively involved in the research process, and

respectfully treated yet, again, only discusses the key children involved in the research process.

It was noted, as mentioned previously, that participating children felt that they HAD to wear the recording devices. Their phraseology indicated that they felt that the partaking in this research was compulsory. It would be interesting to see, if all children were involved in the research, if this would still be the case. Although it was explained that the children did not have to take part if they did not want to, it could be argued that this power dynamic still was prevalent. An alternative to this, is that children could be aware of the potential impact on friendships and be keen to keep these peer relationships on a horizontal plane (Piaget, 1932). It could therefore be that the children reported to their peers in this way, so as not to affect the relationship dynamic. This is something that needs further exploration and is beyond the realms of this paper at this time.

It has been acknowledged that there is an abundance of literature about the ethical protection of children who are involved directly with research (Nutbrown, 2010; Christensen and Prout, 2002), however it is argued that it is similarly as important to reflect on the ethical considerations for the children who are included by default; those children who are indirectly implicated by just being in attendance simultaneously. It is a possibility, it could be asserted, that these children, the ones who have not been chosen as participants, could be affected emotionally by NOT being participants within a research project. It could be that those not chosen to participate could question their own self-worth as result of not being selected. It is argued that self-esteem levels could be affected by this exclusion and this makes it crucial that ethical considerations go so much further than those for the participants. Dowling asserts that ‘one of the most important gifts we can offer young children is a positive view of themselves’ (2014:12) and it should therefore be paramount that any research, and whether a child is a participant in it or not, should not impact upon the view that children have of

themselves. It could be argued that just by being present at the time that research is being undertaken, means that all children within an environment become participatory. It is therefore argued that it should be regarded as essential that all children are treated with equal respect and consideration, and that no child is left to feel demoralised in any way as result of a research process, whether they are a direct participant or not. EECERA (2015:6) maintain that 'participants' should be considered as 'subjects with rights not objects.' Again it is argued that this should also be the situation for those who are involved in a non-participatory manner. European guidelines set out that 'all research must be conducted with the human rights and capabilities of all respondents being given absolute respect and acknowledgement' (EECERA, 2015:6) but it is asserted, as a result of these discussions, that this needs to be taken one step further and this respect and acknowledgement should to be expanded and should encompass ALL those involved, directly or by default. BERA guidelines (2011:5) engage in the wider context by stating that research participants should be protected from harm, and participants 'may simply be part of the context'. It is argued that this wider context should be given much more emphasis within a research project and the potential impact on non-participants should be considered when obtaining ethical approval.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper it has been recognised that ethical considerations are as equally essential for children who are non-participants in research, as for those who are participants. Although it is recognised as such, it is argued that it will never be possible to eradicate all ethical issues. As Dickson and Roethlisberger (2003) recognise, it is not possible to undertake research without any impact whatsoever, however it has been argued throughout

that by considering those children who are not participating directly in the research in as much detail as those who are participants, then this can go some way to protecting those who may otherwise be vulnerable.

In agreement with Dowling, who states that ‘one of the most important gifts we can offer young children is a positive view of themselves’ (2014:12) it is argued that researchers have this responsibility to ALL children who are involved with the research process, whether through planning or default.

In conclusion therefore it is argued that ethical planning should be undertaken, prior to research being carried out, and that planning should account for all who will be within the play and learning environment throughout the time of research. It is not sufficient to solely concentrate on those who are specifically participating as that is the time when harm could well be done in the name of research. We all have a responsibility to do no harm and this requires thoughtfulness, organisation and a reflexivity towards ALL that we meet in the research process.

A phrase such as “why haven’t I got one of those” is one to be avoided at all costs.

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