“Is it Fun?” Developing Children Centred Research Methods

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, geographers have contributed to the growing body of interdisciplinary research developing new ways of undertaking research with children. Traditional research methods which do not directly involve working with children, such as the large scale observation of children, have been criticised for carrying out research on rather than with children. Instead, drawing upon the increasingly important children’s rights movement, researchers have been developing inclusive and participatory children centred methodologies, which place the voices of children, as social actors, at the centre of the research process. In this paper, we draw upon two ongoing postgraduate geographical research projects with children to reflect upon our own experiences of adopting children centred research methodologies. We also critically evaluate our own use of different innovative children centred research techniques, such as photographs, diaries, in-depth interviews and surveys. We also highlight the importance of considering the impact of the spaces in which we conduct our research.

Keywords Children, children centred research, photographs, diaries, drawings

Introduction: The New Social Studies of Childhood

Until recently, children have not been a principal focus within many social science disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and human geography (James, 1990, Philo, 1997). ‘Children’ is a contested term, referring to individuals across a variety of ages (see James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). ‘Children’ is a contested term, referring to individuals across a variety of ages (see James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). In this paper, in line with much other research (Holloway and Valentine, 2000) we refer to ‘children’ as those aged under 16. Children were often subsumed within other more ‘important’ areas of focus, such as education or the family (Brannen and O’Brien, 1995, Corsaro, 1997). Much existing research has largely ignored or only pe-
ripherally recorded children’s actual experiences of the social world, re-enforcing their invisibility (Holloway and Valentine, 2000).

However, over the past decade there has been a growing interest in the sociological study of children’s lives (Mayall, 2001). This diverse collection is encompassed by the term ‘the new social studies of childhood’. The new social studies of childhood problematises and transforms the ‘natural’ category of child into the ‘cultural’ (Jenks, 1996). This growing field of research is international, drawing upon research undertaken in Europe (Qvortrup, 1996), the US (Hart, 1992) and developing countries (Ansell, 2001, Punch, 2001). Furthermore, it crosses traditional academic boundaries, drawing upon research and expertise from a wide variety of disciplines, including but not limited to sociology (Jenks, 1996, Prout and James, 1996), social policy and social work (McNeish, 1999, Smith and Barker, 1999), anthropology (Boyden and Ennew, 1997, James, Jenks and Prout, 1998), education (Alderson, 1995, Edwards and Alldred, 1999) as well as geography.

The new social studies of childhood recognises that childhood and children’s own social relationships are worthy of investigation in their own right. There is a growing body of research examining the ways in which children are competent ‘social actors’ who actively contribute to, and influence their own lives (Sibley, 1991, O’Brien et al, 2000, Smith and Barker, 2000). This re-theorising of childhood parallels the growing visibility of the children’s rights movement upon the political agenda (PDHRE, 2000). Most significantly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) clearly sets out the global recognition for children’s rights to protection, provision and participation and the need to integrate and apply these within economic, social and political policy making (Muscroft, 1999). Within the UK, the Children’s Act (1989) requires adults to take into account the feelings and wishes of children. Such developments as these have begun to enable children to express their own views and participate in decisions affecting their own lives. Contemporary research undertaken within the new social studies of childhood is very much influenced by, and contributes to, the children’s rights movement. Both movements have encouraged children’s participation in decision-making pro-
cesses within research and policy development, and to make children more ‘visible’, particularly in relation to policy (Muscroft, 1999).

This move towards children’s representation in research draws upon the work of ‘advocacy geographers’, popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and currently enjoying a resurgence. Such research moves away from an inward academic focus upon knowledge and theory, to more outward and responsive research agendas which attempt to communicate the experiences and needs of ‘the researched’, and to enable their participation in policy development (Philo, 1997). Advocacy is a key feature of the new social studies of childhood, and is also an increasingly common feature of research with other social groups traditionally silenced or excluded in the research process, such as women, the disabled and ethnic minorities (Alderson, 2000, Harrison et al, 2001, Pink, 2001). Matthews and Limb (1999), for example, call researchers to participate in the ‘politics of place’ by linking children and policy makers.

**The Development of Children Centred Research**

Over the last thirty years, researchers have used a number of different methodologies and techniques in research with children. Traditional positivistic methodologies, with an emphasis on the large scale quantitative observation, measurement and assessment of children by various groups of adult professionals, have been criticised for seeing children as mere objects to be studied, carrying out research on rather than with children (Hill et al, 1996, Mauthner, 1997). Furthermore, such research has been underpinned by adult assumptions and focused upon adult interests, rather than the interests of children (Hood et al, 1996, Valentine, 1999). Thus, children have rarely had the opportunity to speak for themselves in research (Oakley, 1994, Christensen and James, 2000).

The 1990s witnessed the development of new ways of working with children within the new social studies of childhood, repositioning children’s voices at the centre of the research process. This has also led to new ways of engaging with children, characterised by mutuality and ‘negotiation not imposition’ (Hill et al, 1996). The challenge for re-
searchers is to develop research strategies that are ‘fair and respectful’ to children as the subjects, rather than objects of the research (Morrow and Richards, 1996, p91). Researchers need to listen carefully to children’s agendas, and address issues relevant to children’s lives (Hood et al, 1996). However, children, as individuals and a social group, are often powerless and vulnerable in relation to adults (McDowell, 2001). Researchers, as adults with more experience, physical presence, institutional positioning and social standing, hold greater status over their child-participants (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Valentine, 1999). Researchers have begun to discuss the impact of these power relations upon research and to suggest ways to combat these unequal power relations in the pursuit of more ‘children friendly’ research (Hart, 1992).

The development of children centred research methods, based upon children’s preferred methods of communication, has been one key way of addressing the issue of power relations. Many children find traditional methods such as questionnaire surveys either intimidating (since they require a high degree of literacy), inappropriate (since they are often devoid from any context) or boring (since they are no ‘fun’) (David, 1992, Smith and Barker, 1999). New ‘methodologies of representation’ have been developed to enable children to communicate through, for example, drawing, photography, stories or song (Alderson, 2000, Christensen and James, 2000). Such techniques disregard age as synonymous with children’s abilities and aim to be inclusive, and to build rapport, trust and confidence with participants (Solberg, 1996). However, since there are many ways in which children communicate, an increasing number of research projects adopt a multi method approach, to recruit as many children as possible (Morrow and Richards, 1996, Sapkota & Sharma, 1996). However, researchers need to be aware that what adults perceive as children friendly and empowering for children may be seen by participants as adult centred and an imposition (Oakley, 1994, Ansell, 2001).

Debates about recognising and addressing power relations in the research process are part of the wider move towards reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to ‘the self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher’ (England, 2000).
1994, p82). Many types of social research now recognise that ‘objectivity’ is either undesirable or unachievable (Macbeth, 2001). An increasing number of feminist and qualitative researchers critically examine their inter-subjective influence upon the research process and the production of data (Pink, 2001). Researchers must reflect upon their own position and roles and evaluate their research in its attempts to achieve meaningful participation, rather than to simply adopt a tokenistic view of what the researcher perceives to be an appropriate method. Whilst striving for the ‘idealism’ of children centred research, researchers must be ‘realists’ in their reflexive evaluation of children centred research methods in practice.

Setting the Scene: Our Research Projects

This paper will now give an open and reflexive account of the practical application of a variety of children centred research methods, as used in two ongoing postgraduate research projects in the UK. John’s research investigates the spatial mobility of 4-11 year olds, and considers the impact of increasing reliance on the car for children’s mobility. John’s research, undertaken both at school and at respondents’ homes, employed a variety of methods, including photographs, diaries, drawings in depth interviews and questionnaires. Susie’s research explores children’s experiences and spaces of citizenship and exclusion within a rural environment. Furthermore, the research, undertaken with young people aged 13-16 years, examines the potential role citizenship education could have on social inclusion. Susie’s research, undertaken in schools, also employed a variety of methods, including questionnaires, photographs, diaries and in depth interviews. This paper addresses our experiences of adopting different children centred research methods. In both research projects, we have tried to adopt children centred practices at all stages of the research, for example, in recruiting children as participants. Following gaining informed consent from parents, both Susie and John used children centred leaflets, written in simple, clear language, to explain the research, and to inform children how they might participate using the different children centred methods. Figure 1 illustrates the first section of John’s children centred leaflet.
This children centred leaflet was followed up with a verbal introduction to the project, before asking children whether they would like to participate. Furthermore, since informed consent is not a one off but an ongoing process, at the beginning of each different research method, children were once again asked if they would like to participate and reminded they could withdraw at any time.

In attempting to establish children-centred research, Susie consulted with children over the design of her research methods. Two young people (Calum aged 16 and Holly aged 13) advised Susie on issues of accessible language, the feasibility of certain methods as children-centred, and on the general design and implementation of the research process. This process of consultation is particularly important since research conducted by Oakley (2000) highlighted the significance young people place on language. As Scott (2000) suggests, the construct, tone and expression of language needs to be appropriate and relevant to potential young participants. When constructing her questionnaire Susie had tried to use language that she felt would be appeal-
ing to young people, using terms such as ‘hang out’. However, the young people advising Susie suggested that more conventional terms such as ‘socialise’ might be more suitable. Children also asked for removing phrases such as ‘ethnicity’ since many of them did not understand such terms. Susie’s advisors also recommended using coloured paper and a different font to make it more attractive and appealing and less ‘official looking’. Thus, Susie’s advisors challenged her perceptions of what might promote a children-centred approach, and highlights the importance of consulting with children over the development of appropriate research methods.

Figure 2: Introducing the research tasks
In order to provide children with guidance and information about each individual research method, Susie produced a leaflet to explain the research tasks. See Figure 2.

Susie also asked children to choose their own pseudonyms, to give them further involvement and inclusion in the research process. Many chose nicknames or internet chat room identities. However, at the end of the research process, Susie asked her respondents if they were still happy to use the pseudonyms they had chosen previously. To provide a context for this discussion, Susie showed children the potential outcomes of the research, such as journal articles. As a result of this, many children felt that their voices would be taken more seriously without the use of pseudonyms, and chose to use their own names, or nicknames. Thus, in this paper, where the children have asked, we use their real names.

Evaluating Children Centred Research Methods

Currently, there are a diverse range of innovative research methods being developed and used in research with children. These include, but are not limited to, photography, drawing, diaries, sentence completion activities, children-led interviews, video diaries, surveys, and web-based methods (see Hart, 1992, or Mauthner, 1997 for a more detailed description). The following discussion will draw upon the research methods as designed and used in our research projects, including photography, drawing, diaries, and questionnaire surveys. As geographers, we are aware that our research has been undertaken in a number of different spaces. Thus, throughout the following discussion of the different methods we have employed in our projects, we are keen to stress the significance of space and place in influencing the success of particular methods. Working at home and at school with children, we are thus in a position to map the spatiality of children centred methods.

Children’s Photographs

Photography is an increasingly popular children centred research method (Orellana, 1999). Disposable or instant cameras are very simple to use, and allow children to explore and record their own experiences, feelings and sense of place(s), providing their own practical
observations of their experiences (Hart, 1992). Cameras are particularly beneficial when working with children with poor written or verbal literacy (Young & Barrett, 2001). Giving children the responsibility of a camera also help to forge a relationship of trust with the researcher, mirroring feminists’ attempts to develop more egalitarian research (Harrison et al, 2001). Cameras do not require the presence of researchers when photographs are taken (Young and Barrett, 2001). This avoids the researcher altering the dynamics of the space being captured on film, and empowers children since there are no spatial and temporal restrictions on their participation in the project.

John asked children to take photographs of their journey to and from school and other places, whilst Susie asked children to express their sense of belonging within their local communities. Susie designed a very innovative approach to identifying the owner of each camera, advising each child to ask a friend to take a photo of the owner of the camera, or to photograph a large piece of paper with their name on it. Not only did this avoid confusion returning cameras to the right person, it gave the children some sense of ownership over their cameras and photos. It was only with children and their parents’ express permission that we kept negatives and photographs, giving children ownership and control over their pictures (Alderson, 2000). A small proportion of children in Susie’s research clearly stated they did not want anyone else to see their photographs. As a further attempt to foster reciprocity and overcome inequality in the research process and as a record of their participation, we gave to our participants a set of the developed photographs (Mauthner, 1997). However, although we were able to gain informed consent from our participants prior to their involvement, and assure them of confidentiality, we were unable to achieve this with all of the individuals who were in the photographs produced. Thus, John made strict guidelines that no photograph containing an individual would be used publicly, since there was no way to gain informed consent from that person.

Furthermore, empowering participants to give them freedom over their cameras also meant that the researchers had no idea what photographs might be taken. John and Susie were both aware that
many researchers had found that children, like any participants, might find the research encounter as a mechanism of revealing views or opinions (or in our case, take photographs) that are offensive and shocking to adult sensibilities (Horton, 2001). Thus, John and Susie both explained to the developers that they had no control over the pictures the children had taken, anxious over the possibility that the films may contain images that would put them at risk as a researcher.

Photography was a very popular method in our research projects, with significant numbers of children of all ages and abilities choosing to take part in this method. However, once children had returned their cameras it became clear there were varying levels of engagement in this method. Some children were confident and experienced at taking photographs, and had enjoyed the cameras. Others had struggled to find inspiration and only taken a handful of photos. For some, the immediate novelty of having a camera had quickly worn off. During the later discussions, some were embarrassed about their photography skills. Thus, it appeared that whilst some children were very comfortable and confident at using this method to represent the spaces under study, others were not. It also suggested that some children did not really want to participate, and not using the camera may well be a sign of children withdrawing their informed consent to participate.

Issues of interpretation, meaning and representation are critical when using photography as a children-centred research method (Orellana, 1999). It is vital for researchers to ascertain children’s own reasons for taking photographs, rather than giving their own ‘adultist’ interpretation and assumptions to the pictures. Thus, many researchers ask children to discuss and explain their photographs. In this way, photographs are often used as prompts for other full scale methods, such as interviews. The importance of asking children to provide a context to their photos is exemplified by an example in Susie’s research. One young person, Kat photographed her local bus shelter, covered in graffiti. See Figure 3.
Susie’s initial interpretation of the image was that this was a run down place Kat would like to change or improve. In doing so, Susie had both focused her interpretations upon what she perceived children might photograph, and how such images would fit into the categories of her own research agenda. Later discussions with Kat and her friends revealed that the bus shelter or ‘busie’ was one of the most significant places for young people to meet and socialise. Furthermore, the local council had tried to demolish the ‘busie’ but the local children had united to save the space. The children obtained a grant from the council to paint the shelter in their own designs, covering up offensive graffiti. Kat had in fact taken the photograph to show she was proud of her own artwork on the ‘busie’. This example highlights that children’s reasons for taking particular photographs, and the context and story behind them, can only be accessed by directly drawing upon children’s own interpretations and recollections. Our own adult centred perceptions are often incorrect.
Drawing

Drawing is a popular way for many children to communicate, and is an increasingly popular research method (Mauthner, 1997). Drawing enables children to express themselves and communicate freely, especially children with low literacy skills (Young and Barrett, 2001). Like photography, drawing is a process in which children are in control, and researchers do not need to be present. John used drawings for children to explain events on the journey to and from school and other places. Susie asked her respondents to draw the spaces they participated in or those from which they were excluded. Drawing proved to be much more popular in John’s research (with 7-11 year olds) than with Susie’s (13 year olds). To understand this difference in popularity, we argue for the need to consider the spaces in which we used this method. In schools, drawing is seen as an appropriate method of expression only for younger children, whereas it may be seen as inappropriate or ‘babyish’ for older children to communicate with this method. Thus, it is the cultures of communication present within the spaces in which we conduct our research which influence the impact of each method. We need to recognise the significance of space in evaluating various methods of communication.

Interpretation is key to enabling children to communicate through drawings. Similar to using photographs, it is necessary to discuss the drawing with the child, to ensure that the drawing represents the child’s meaning and interpretation, rather than those of the researchers (Hart, 1992). One obvious example of the necessity of this is when we have asked ‘what’s this drawing about?’ to be told by a blank-faced staring child ‘it’s only a scribble... a doodle!’ The necessity of discussing pictures with children is highlighted by Figure 4, drawn by a 10 year old girl.

A follow on conversation with the respondent highlighted that the drawing represented the fact that the respondent always enjoyed walking to school with her friend. She was very disappointed when her friend was ill. Not only did this mean that she did not have her friends’ company on the way to school. But that she also had to be driven to
school rather than walk. This example illustrates that further discussion is needed to ensure effective communication between researcher and respondent. One key ethical issue when using drawings is that of ownership. Drawings are often a labour intensive exercise, requiring skill, investment and commitment by children (Hart, 1992). Many researchers are asked by their respondents ‘when can I have my picture back?’ John asked permission to copy the drawing, ensuring the child retains their original copy, once more promoting a more reciprocal research relationship.

**Diaries**

The diary is synonymous with a personal account of ones life. Therefore, it can provide a sense of intimacy and allow children to freely record feelings and experiences that they may find embarrassing or challenging to discuss in an interview setting. Scott (2000) suggests that diaries should be kept simple, and highlights examples where children’s diaries have been beneficial in gaining insights into expenditure and time-use. Both John and Susie have used diaries as part of their re-
search. John asked children to record where they went over a week long period. Susie gave her participants the opportunity to complete a week long diary relating to their participation in and exclusions from school and wider community life. Diaries appeared to be more popular in Susie’s research (with 13 year olds) rather than John’s (7-11 year olds). However, we do not believe older children were simply more able or more competent to undertake such a written technique. To do so would embed our respondents within the strict linear progression of developmental psychology, and to fail to recognise children’s own agency and the diversity of competencies and communication skills within all age groups. Our explanations for the difference in popularity once more draws upon a geographical analysis of the research methods. Written methods are more central forms of communication within secondary school than primary school. Hence for older children, writing is seen as a more legitimate and everyday form of communication. Furthermore, the place of homework in the daily structuring of older children’s lives means they are more used to undertaking such regular written activities (Edwards and Alldred, 1999). Thus the power relations in specific spaces of school and home encourage certain forms of expressions as appropriate for certain groups of children.

In both research projects, the diaries produced significant variations in the volume and quality of data produced. Some children wrote at great length, whilst the interest of other children faded as the week progressed. Some wrote only one or two entries. Despite our discussions regarding the culture of the school constructing diaries as a more appropriate method, our experiences also highlight that for some children diaries are too much like school work. The association between the diary and the space of the school resulted in many children opting out of in depth participation in the diaries, mirroring Costley’s (2000) experiences where research tasks carried out in schools were seen as work. However, for a sizeable minority of children, it is a valuable way of communication and gathering in depth information.

Several methodological issues arose from adopting diaries as a research technique. Asking children to express their own views and
concerns does not always result in the production of information directly relevant to the research. Children in Susie’s research interpreted the dairies’ guidelines in a variety of ways, producing very varied descriptions and accounts. On preliminary examination of the diaries, Susie experienced much of Warren’s (2000) anxieties and frustrations when she felt children had not always responded to the task in the way she had anticipated. One boy’s diary reveals very detailed anecdotes about dinner time in his household:

“At 6.30 we had dinner (it looked like cat food but Dad said it was chunks of ham and some peas and carrots but I don’t really believe him!” (13 year old boy)

Children’s responses may not explicitly reveal direct ‘answers’ to research questions but instead highlight issues and experiences important to their own lives, providing insights into daily routines and interactions with family members.

Ensuring confidentiality for the diary extracts was often problematic, both in research at home and at schools. Susie’s diaries were distributed in schools, with members of teaching staff present. Whilst some children exercised their right not to take part there was pressure from both teachers and peers to participate. Within the culture of surveillance and compliance within an institutional space such as the school, children are rarely given true choices about participating (Alderson, 2000). Conversely, John’s diaries were distributed through the home. John assumed that within the space of the home, children would be accorded more freedom and autonomy to participate. To assist this, John explained to parents and children that the diary was private, and that participation was voluntary. However, similar processes of surveillance and compliance appeared to be at work at the home as well as at the school. When returning to collect the diaries, many parents apologised about the lack of entries, or grammatical errors. In some cases, parents had written their own entries. Thus, in both cases, the existing power relations in the space in which the research was undertaken had impacted upon the possibilities of creating a confidential space for children to take part in research. Thus, as researchers we
need to be reflexively aware of the social context of the location of research and the impact it may have on the data produced.

**Questionnaires**

The choice of methods discussed thus far reflects the wider trend within children’s geographies toward qualitative methods. Children have largely been rendered invisible in most large scale quantitative research, which focuses predominantly at the level of the household or family, rather than children (Scott, 2000). Furthermore, quantitative research has often been problematised, with its emphasis on detachment and objectivity. The format of questionnaire surveys are not renowned to be children friendly. However, there are currently debates over the usefulness and applicability of quantitative methods in children centred research, mirroring feminist debates regarding the appropriateness of quantitative research in mapping out various expressions of patriarchy (Oakley, 1994). Large scale, quantitative data collection is needed to situate children’s lives within the wider socio-politico-economic context (Hood et al, 1996). Quantitative data can produce information about the implementation of children’s rights (see DoH, 1994, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1995), and provide international comparisons about children’s economic position (Qvortup, 1996).

There are also debates concerning the practical design of questionnaire surveys to create an accessible children centred research method. Innovative techniques, such as pictorial Likert scales and the use of open questions allow children some freedom to structure their responses (Dockerell et al, 2000). Care must be taken not to underestimate children’s capabilities, since as Lewis & Lindsay (2000) note, children often respond to questionnaires in teen magazines. One of the more successful attempts to include children through surveys has been The British Household Panel Study. A pre-recorded questionnaire, played on a personal stereo, enabled children to answer the questions at their own pace, in a booklet. This ensured that children of differing
abilities could complete the survey whilst maintaining confidentiality (Scott, 2000).

Both John and Susie used questionnaire surveys, with varying degrees of success. John gathered information about children’s spatial movements, whilst Susie used a questionnaire survey to explore children’s participation in and exclusion from spaces of citizenship. However, echoing the experiences of conducting diaries, Susie found it was often problematic to keep questionnaires confidential in the space of the school. Teachers administered the questionnaires during registration and tutor periods. During the pilot study, although not explicitly stated, it was believed that some children were reluctant to answer questions relating to out-of-bounds or ‘forbidden’ spaces as some children had ticked ‘yes’ and then crossed it out again. This was backed up when one of the teachers said that they had checked the questionnaires through to see if the children had answered the questions properly. Alderson (2000) highlights that it is not uncommon for teaching staff to presume a right or need to know the contents of the research encounter. As a result sticky labels were included with the actual questionnaire so each child could seal them before handing them to their teacher.

John’s questionnaire survey was conducted via the home rather than the school. Since John’s work was aimed at a younger age group (7-11), John asked parents and children to fill in the questionnaire survey together. Some questions asked firstly the child’s perception on a topic such as ‘how would you like to travel to school?’ then asking the parent ‘how would you like your child to travel to school?’”. However, talking to some children who were taking part in the project using other research methods, it became clear that they had not taken part in the survey at all, despite their parents claim to the contrary. This lack of visibility and certainty about children’s involvement is a common feature in such research. Mayall (2001) discusses how parents overestimate the extent to which they involve their children in such processes of participation. Thus, although the survey generated useful information about children travelling to and from school and other places, it is
perhaps less certain the extent to which this method has empowered and recorded the voices of children.

**Conclusion**

There are a diversity of research methods currently being used in research with children. The growing trend to develop methods to consult with children mirrors developments in making visible the voices of other traditionally marginalised social groups (Pink, 2001). In this paper, we have highlighted some of the successes of adopting and developing children centred research methods. Children centred research methods can enable children to clearly articulate their views and opinions, as well as promoting a more equal research relationship based on feminist ideals of reciprocity (Harrison et al, 2001). These methods enable a small but increasing number of initiatives to consult with children over the development of policies at a local and national level in the UK (Smith and Barker, 1999).

Many of these methods of participation are qualitative techniques, such as photography, diaries and drawings. Qualitative methods are seen as more effective in enabling children to communicate in their own terms. However, we have also argued that there is a place for quantitative methods such as questionnaires. Although they may not allow children friendly communication to the same extent, they are invaluable in providing large scale information for children’s advocates in the policy process. A multi method approach helps to reflect the diversity of children’s experiences and competencies, by engaging as many children as possible of different ages, backgrounds and abilities.

Some common ethical dilemmas arise from the use of these methods, including interpretation, confidentiality and the wider context of data production and collection. Our research has highlighted that effective interpretation of data produced by children centred research methods requires respondents themselves to explain the context of their photographs, drawings and other materials. Researchers’ own interpretations are inaccurate adult sensibilities and preconceptions, which can silence or misrepresent the voices of children. Thus, researchers must engage with respondents more thoroughly to ensure the
effective communication of children. Confidentiality is a continuing and constant issue for researchers undertaking children centred research methods. Many adults, including parents, teachers and other professionals, are not used to giving children a voice, nor giving them autonomy or the right to confidentiality. There are many examples in our research of adults in a variety of spaces routinely violating children’s confidentiality in the research process. Our attempts to circumvent these problems and ensure confidentiality are only often partially successful. As researchers, we must constantly strive to prevent or limit these breeches in confidentiality, and be reflexively aware of the potential impact on the data collected.

Moreover, there is also a spatiality to the application of children centred methods. Adults and existing power relations in institutions and spaces in which children spend their time have a much wider impact upon research with children. Although researchers attempt to place children at the centre of the research process, and can obtain some very eloquent and in depth glimpses into children’s lives, researchers must also be aware of the context of the spaces in which the research is undertaken. We have highlighted how the popularity of particular methods may not simply be due to children’s preferences, but also due to what is seen as ‘legitimate forms of communication’ within the spaces in which children spend their time. It is perhaps ironic that in our aim to develop children centred research, we are calling for researchers to pay attention to and to reflexively evaluate the impact on our research of the spaces, institutions, cultures and individuals of the school, household and family and the wider context in which children are situated.

These points of discussion suggest that children centred research is still an ideal, rather than reality in practice. Researchers must be reflexively aware of limitations in the development of children centred research. Rather than an objective process, data is produced and collected through inter-subjectivity between researcher, respondent and other significant individuals and institutions (Pink, 2001). Power relations can never be overcome, must be constantly analysed and made visible but through reflexive discussion. However, reflexivity itself,
which sheds light on this inter-subjectivity, can only be partial- the complete impact of the researcher upon the research process can never entirely be identified (Macbeth, 2001).

However, despite problems in developing ‘ideal’ ways of communicating with children, these centred research methods do result in research that is more children centred or less adult centred than previous forms of enquiry. However, we must be aware as researchers that there is no objective, universal truth of children’s experiences to be uncovered. Rather, through children centred research methods, we can offer partial glimpses that reflect in one form the complexity and diversity of children’s lives. Although connections between academic research and policy development are useful (Harrison et al, 2001), we must be aware of these limitations when promoting the voices of children and communicating their concerns when working with policy makers.
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Bibliographic Note

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