Symposium: Women and Children First: beyond patriarchy in methodological design

Children as peer researchers: reflections on a journey of mutual discovery

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Introduction

This paper explores some of the ethical and methodological challenges presented when researching children’s lives. This is an important area of focus given the burgeoning interest in children’s research driven essentially by UK policy agendas around the ‘Every Child Matters Children’s Agenda’. The expectation that children should be involved in the planning, development, delivery and evaluation of public services is articulated in statutory and non-statutory frameworks (Children Act 1989; UNCRC, 1989). To that end, a range of initiatives have emerged in recent years in the context of a drive towards evidence based practice and predicated on the principles of consultation with, and participation of, children.
The paper offers a critical examination of the tensions and contradictions faced by researchers committed to promoting the participation of children in the evaluation of services that affect them. In particular, it focuses on the research process itself and the challenging but rewarding experience of involving children as peer researchers. The research underpinning the paper is a small-scale study by the author evaluating the work of an emotional literacy project in the North West of England. The research project was informed by theoretical and epistemological insights from both feminism and the sociology of childhood. A multi-dimensional qualitative study was designed to explore the views of children, parents, teachers and allied professionals. The emphasis throughout the paper is on the need for child-sensitive methodologies for eliciting and representing experience, and ethically sound approaches to researching children's lives (Alderson and Morrow, 2004).

**Deconstructing ‘childhood’ in social research**

*Childhood is that period during which persons are subject to a set of rules and regulations unique to them, and one that does not apply to members of other social categories. Moreover, childhood is a period in a person’s life during which he/she is neither expected nor allowed to fully participate in various domains of social life* (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994: 251).

The starting point for this paper is an interrogation of those perspectives of ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ that have been commonly applied in children’s research. The ways in which researchers ‘see’ (cf Berger, 1972) children informs the power relations that ensue between researcher and participant. Traditionally children have been viewed as the ‘objects’ of research with adult researchers acting as interpreters of their lives (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Indeed, until relatively recently, the idea of children as research ‘subjects’ or, even more controversially, as researchers themselves, would perhaps have been met with scepticism, even derision. This is because there has been a deep-seated wariness of relying on children’s testimonies as they are perceived to be untrustworthy and idiosyncratic (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Notwithstanding the existence of powerful
rhetorical statements within international convention, state policy and the law regarding children’s ‘right’ to be consulted; to express their views and have them taken seriously and to participate in decisions affecting their own lives, the assumption that children are not really capable prevails and children struggle for parity of status with adults in this regard.

These objections are derived within the social construction of childhood where stereotypical assumptions about children’s status and capacities confirm, legitimise and perpetuate their powerlessness. There is a striking parallel between the social construction of childhood and that of gender. Just as femininity is incomprehensible without and inferior to masculinity, similarly childhood can only be understood as an inferior opposite to adulthood. The category ‘child’, just like that of ‘woman’, signifies the ‘other’ (de Beauvoir, 1949). Just as those who subscribe to patriarchal beliefs often fall back on biological essentialism to legitimise women’s social oppression, so too have the allegedly universal developmental vulnerabilities and incapacities of children been used to prop up a social construction which is itself a major source of their weakness, and an obstacle to their emancipation. Since rationality and competence are established as the hallmarks of adulthood, children are assumed to be intrinsically irrational and incompetent. Developmental discourses dictate that children can only aspire to achieve the same status as adults as they progress through the lifecourse. Thus, reduced to the status of ‘human-becomings’, children’s powerlessness is confirmed and legitimated through the assertion of their incapacity (James and Prout, 1990).

**Insights from feminism**

> Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949: 175).

The insight from feminist politics that all aspects of social life are shaped by patriarchy led to the inevitable conclusion that all theory and research is also patriarchal. Contrary to traditional positivistic assumptions, feminists refused
to accept that research is, as Stanley and Wise put it, ‘a product of pure, uncontaminated, factual awareness’ (1983: 154). Far from being ‘neutral’, traditional research was identified as reflecting gender-bias by concentrating on the social world of men and male definitions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’. Therefore feminists set about ‘undoing’ a plethora of prevailing assumptions or ‘social truths’ that obscured the social reality of women’s lives.

First, feminists exposed and challenged androcentrism within social research – the way in which most of what is ‘known’ has been generated by white male study of white male society. As Barbara Du Bois observed:

> What we have had up to now is theory that purports to speak of human beings, of people – but theory that is in fact grounded in, derived from, based on and reinforcing of the experience, perceptions and beliefs of men (in Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983: 165).

Androcentrism rendered women not only ‘unknown’ but also ‘unknowable’. In social research women’s interests were only considered significant in their functional relationship to those of men and the power of women to define their own experience was denied. Dale Spender (1981: 74) noted how the meanings women began to generate to explain their own experience “could literally be ‘unthinkable’ to men”. Resolving this situation required more than just a gap-filling exercise. It involved a process of making sense of the world as gendered beings and the creation of new criteria for what could be considered ‘knowledge’, or as Du Bois (op cit) explained, asserting the right to ‘see’ and ‘know’ in a different way. Feminism forced the study and understanding of reality as contextual, inter-related and multi-dimensional rather than linear, hierarchical and dichotomous.

This leads to another set of fundamental ‘social truths’ that had to be undone – that the only valid research was that based on ‘hard’ methods and since it was assumed that women were by nature ‘illogical’, they had no aptitude for research. Traditional research relied on methodologies that emphasised rationality, objectivity and detachment and de-emphasised intuition, subjectivity and complexity. Feminist researchers argued that the objectivity / subjectivity divide was a distortion and that ‘hard’ methods often promised
more ‘truth’ than they were capable of. They were also invariably based on hierarchical, manipulative relationships between researcher and researched – something inconsistent with the feminist principles of egalitarianism, collectivism and sisterhood. Traditional methods also limited access to certain kinds of knowledge – particularly the subjective realm of everyday experience. The only way to address this was for women to create their own paths to knowledge through research about and for women.

**Key features of feminist research:**

- It recognises the need to study women in their own right and uncover women’s experiences as valid;
- It re-evaluates theories based on men and generalised to women;
- It emphasises women’s strengths, not their victimisation; focuses on women’s resistance;
- It views women as actors, not passive objects of research;
- It focuses on the female world and everyday life as politics – ‘the personal as political’;
- It is committed to exposing the oppression of women and the complexity of this oppression;
- It is motivated for women and provides evidence of the need for change;
- It disrupts prevailing notions of what is considered ‘inevitable’;
- Feminist researchers write themselves into the research and make their influence explicit;
- It challenges the tendency to ‘study down’, acknowledges and addresses power differentials;
- It is reciprocal – committed to ‘giving back’;
- It contributes to a more rounded knowledge of human experience – ‘herstory’

**Insights from the new sociology of childhood**

When children are denied knowledge about research that directly affects them because of adult concerns about possible ‘damage’ to them, their ability to decide for themselves is also denied. Rules designed by adults to ‘protect’ children from ‘sensitive’ issues in research reflect ‘rules for children, rather than for adults’ (Kelley et al, 1997: 313; emphasis in the original) and demonstrate the power of discourses that construct children as incompetent (Campbell, 2008: 42).

In much the same way as feminists exposed the political and ideological processes underpinning ‘knowledge’ about women, since the 1990s,
academics, researchers and practitioners committed to a positive rights agenda for children have sought to ‘undo’ a range of prevailing ‘social truths’ about children and childhood. Just as androcentrism in research practice once dictated that women were ‘unknown’ and ‘unknowable’, similarly adultism in research practice has been found guilty of obscuring the social reality of children’s lives. Most of what is ‘known’ about children and childhood has been generated predominantly by white, adult, male researchers, either omitting or distorting the experiences of children. Children’s interests and concerns have been considered significant only in their functional relationship to those of adults.

Within the ‘new sociology of childhood’ an understanding has been developed of the institutionalised processes through which children have been excluded from the production of knowledge about their own lives. In particular the issue of protectionism in children’s research has been problematised. First, traditional protectionist discourses construct children and young people as ‘vulnerable’ in the research context and derive from ‘the belief that paternalism is better than self-determination where decisions relating to children are concerned’ (Masson, 1991: 529). However, there are significant tensions and contradictions in the notion of childhood ‘vulnerability’. For example, what drives a concern with ‘vulnerability’? What makes a research subject vulnerable? Lansdown (1994) has made the distinction between the inherent and the structural vulnerability of children.

The inherent vulnerability of children, as a consequence of biological immaturity, emphasizes that researchers and significant adults in children’s lives have an ethical responsibility to protect children. However, the structural vulnerability of children comes about as a consequence of, and subsequently serves to reinforce, social and political mechanisms that reduce children’s power, fail to take their agency into account and disregard their rights (Powell and Smith, 2009: 138).

Structural vulnerability both legitimates and perpetuates the subjugation of children and is the justification of adult authority through the application of the ‘best interests’ rule. Timimi (2005) argues that the notion of ‘in the best
interests of the child’ has become one of the most unhelpful and abused phrases as it is frequently used to justify oppressive decision-making in children’s lives. As Lee (cited in Campbell, 2008: 46) argues, “the more one is in a position to make decisions for children, to speak on their behalf, the more one is able to silence their voices”.

Second, the discourse of protectionism skilfully disguises a fundamental mistrust in children’s competence. Just as feminists exposed and challenged patriarchal discourses that once excluded women from the investigation of social life by asserting their lack of intellectual capacity or aptitude for research, similarly the assumption of childhood incapacity has been successfully challenged by studies that demonstrate children’s capacities for complex thought (see, for example, McNamee, James and James (2005); Messenger, Davies and Mosdell (2005); Short, 1991). Research has demonstrated how “children from a surprisingly early age can understand basic elements of the research process and their role within if this information is presented in an age appropriate manner” (Thompson, cited in Morrow and Richards, 1996: 95).

Emancipatory approaches to research and evaluation in children’s services
Insights from both feminism and the new sociology of childhood enable an analysis of the subtle ways in which adult-child power relationships operate in professional practice, research and evaluation. Practitioners, academics and researchers operate within a range of organisational and legal structures that define what children and childhood are, or should be, like (James and Prout, 1990; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; McNamee, James and James, 2005). These subtleties are less transparent in traditional approaches to research and evaluation. This implies a need for a research methodology that enables researchers to access this domain in order to expose and correct practices that undermine children’s agency.

Within the new sociology of childhood discourses of empowerment are evident that are consistent with the politics, principles and priorities of
emancipatory research. In this context, the approach to research and evaluation is derived within critical analysis of the complex dynamics of adult-child power relations and of oppressive professional discourse and practice where “professionally delivered services are brought into question or are rendered problematic” (Pilgrim and Rogers, 1993: 175). It is an approach that is intrinsically committed to political action and substantive change in the life-worlds of children.

**Key features of an emancipatory model for researching children:**

- It recognises the validity of children’s voices and their right to define their own research agendas;
- It is child-centred, placing a high value on both qualitative methods and dialogistic relationships between researchers and participants;
- It challenges the presumption of incompetence that characterises and dominates mainstream children’s research;
- It ‘sees’ children as valid contributors to knowledge;
- It values children’s knowledge and disseminates it with the intention of informing the development of policy and practice;
- It openly acknowledges the disparities in status and power between adults and children in research and makes every effort to diminish them.

While the principle of children’s participation is now broadly accepted, with many examples of ‘participation activities’ emerging in recent years, attention has turned to how to ensure that children are involved meaningfully in researching their lives. An increasing number of research studies have adopted sound methodological protocols derived within the expanding literature on participatory approaches in children’s research (see, for example, Alderson, 1995; Boyden and Ennew, 1998; Clark and Moss, 2001). The involvement of children as peer researchers represents one such approach.

**From rhetoric to reality: involving children as peer researchers**

This section of the paper outlines how the above discussion informed a peer research project undertaken by the author. Post-research reflections are organised around each stage of the research process and significant points of tension are identified and explored. Three central assumptions underpinned the approach to the research project. First, that childhood is a social rather
than a biological construction. Second, that children are social actors and worthy of study in their own right and from their own perspectives. Third, that an ethnographic approach to social research is more compatible with a child-centred perspective than traditional positivistic research frameworks. Together, these assumptions have informed the “transition towards recognising children as ‘knowers’ – able to generate knowledge as well as being the recipients of knowledge, or being the objects of knowledge” (Foley, 2001: 99-100).

Research context
This was a small-scale commissioned research study evaluating the work of an emotional literacy project in the North West of England. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess whether the emotional literacy project was achieving its stated aims; to capture and disseminate learning of what works, with whom and in which context, when promoting emotional literacy; and to provide policy makers and practitioners with research evidence upon which services can be delivered to children, young people and their families. A number of guiding research questions were initially formulated by the researcher based on the stated aims of the project, including:

- What has been the impact of the project on children, parents/carers, and teachers and other practitioners who have participated in its activities?
- Has the project facilitated the engagement of project workers, teachers and other practitioners in critical reflection on their practice?
- What has been the impact of the project in promoting schools as ‘emotionally safe and healthy’ environments?
- How effective has the project been in increasing knowledge and understanding of emotional literacy locally?
- What has been the level and impact of partnership working?
- Do the project activities constitute a model of good practice that can be replicated in other settings?

Critical reflection 1
Clearly it has to be acknowledged that, at this very early stage (and typically), the focus and direction of the research study was shaped by adults - both myself as the lead researcher and the commissioners of the research. As
such we were in a powerful position to define both the parameters of the investigation – i.e. what the central research questions would be and how these might be investigated. Potentially this could have ‘closed off’ any scope for the children (and indeed other adult participants) to define their research agendas. However, in the researcher’s mind these were always speculative formulations that would be open to challenge and change through engagement in continuous reflexivity and dialogue (Christensen, 2004; Freire, 1972).

**Methodological approach to the research**

The approach to the evaluation was based on the view that interventions centred in complex human relationships require methodologies capable of embracing that complexity and that overly simplistic, quantitative approaches to evaluation fail to do justice to the inherently complex world of practice. Therefore a multi-dimensional qualitative study was designed to explore the views of children, young people, parents/carers, headteachers, teachers, project workers and allied professionals regarding the emotional literacy project from their own perspective. This paper focuses on one dimension of the evaluation – the involvement of children as peer researchers in evaluating the impact of the project on a group of children who had participated in its activities. It is concerned with reflections on the research process rather than the research findings *per se*. These have been published elsewhere (Coppock, 2006).

**Ethical protocol**

A detailed statement of ethical research practice was prepared in advance, broadly based on that produced by Barnardo’s (Alderson, 1995). This was fully discussed in each initial meeting with all participants. An age-appropriate version of the protocol was produced for the children with no significant deviation from the ‘adult’ version.

**The invitation to dialogue and negotiating consent:**

Inevitably, given the strictures governing research with children in the UK, the initial invitation to dialogue about this research project focused on negotiating
access via adult ‘gatekeepers’ – professionals and parents/carers. Initial contact was made with the headteachers of two neighbouring primary schools requesting a meeting to explore the potential for participation in the research. The emotional literacy project was involved in both schools, but had more experience of running programmes in one school (school A) than the other (school B). Introductory focus group meetings were held at each school involving the headteacher, relevant class teacher and learning mentor, the researcher and two members of the emotional literacy project team. The proposed research was fully explained and discussed. Co-operation was obtained from the staff group and permission granted from the headteacher to proceed to the next stage – the recruitment of the parents and children.

Invitation letters and consent forms were delivered via the schools to the parents of Year 6 children in school A and Year 5 children of school B. The Year 6 children at school A were using Circle Time regularly and had participated in a Peer Mentoring Programme during Year 5. The Year 5 children, class teacher and learning mentor at school B were about to begin using Circle Time and Peer Mentoring for the first time. The intention was to invite the Year 6 children from school A to act as peer researchers in evaluating the experiences of the Year 5 children at school B regarding Circle Time and Peer Mentoring. A meeting was convened for parents of both groups of children to meet with the researcher to facilitate open dialogue about the proposed aims and conduct of the research. Consent forms were obtained for 12 of the Year 6 children from school A and the whole class of Year 5 children from school B. Only from this point could the researcher enter into dialogue with the children for the first time.

Two one-hour focus group meetings were convened, in class time; the first with 12 Year 6 children from school A, their learning mentor, emotional literacy project worker and the researcher and the second with the children from school B, their teacher, learning mentor, emotional literacy project worker and the researcher. Although parental consent forms had been obtained for all of the children, their individual written informed consent was also sought. The two focus group sessions were used to explain and discuss
the proposed research with the children *at their level* to ensure that *they* fully understood what would be involved and that *they* were happy to proceed as both research participants and peer researchers. A diverse range of communication methods were used to maximise dialogic engagement with the children in obtaining their informed consent including, for example, discussions using a ‘talking object’, collages and drawings, drama and games, all informed by the expanding literature on participatory techniques (see for example Alderson, 1995; Boyden and Ennew, 1998; Clark and Moss, 2001). These techniques were also used in all of the subsequent focus group meetings with the children.

**Critical reflection 2**

As Powell and Smith (2009) observe, recruitment in educational settings provides a ‘captive audience’ of children making it relatively easy to secure participation. This clearly poses significant ethical issues – especially regarding whether children are genuinely willing participants. However, perhaps equally problematic, children’s opportunities to participate in research can be constrained by a range of adult ‘gatekeepers’ who control researchers’ access to children. Parents, carers and teachers have legal rights and responsibilities to ‘protect’ children and safeguard their welfare and may, in certain circumstances, elect to censor children’s participation. Fortunately for this researcher that was not the case. With careful attention to ‘the approach’ and a commitment to open dialogue with relevant gatekeepers, I was able to negotiate access to the children.

The issue of informed consent dominates deliberations about research with children and is clearly linked to the earlier discussion around vulnerability and competency. Traditionally, children were considered to be *in loco parentis* – the property of their parents – and therefore lacked legal capacity. This status was modified through introduction of the legal distinction of ‘Gillick-competence’, incorporated into the Children Act, 1989 following the infamous case of *Gillick v Wisbech Area Health Authority*. The test for ‘Gillick-competence’ stipulates that a child is competent if s/he has ‘achieved a sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to understand
fully what is proposed’ and that s/he also has ‘sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a wise choice in his or her own interests’ (Morrow and Richards, 1996). *Gillick* usefully moves us away from the idea that chronological age alone determines competence and establishes the legal basis for the child’s self-determination, however its application in practice is far from straightforward (see Masson, 1991; 2004).

Komulainen (2007) sensibly cautions against the temptation to replace one form of essentialism – “children are incompetent” – with another – “children are competent”. She argues that it is necessary to acknowledge that children can be both vulnerable and competent. This requires a delicate ‘balancing act’ on the part of the researcher – one that can only be achieved through ethical reflexivity. To this end the issue of children’s informed consent was ever-present in this research and was continuously explored and re-negotiated at every stage.

*Sharing ideas, exploring possibilities and shaping the design*

Three further focus group meetings were held with the children from school A in preparation for their role as peer researchers. The first session was used to explore their reflections on and experiences of Circle Time and Peer Mentoring from the previous term as a basis for exploring how these might reframe and/or ‘fine tune’ the researcher’s initial research questions. The other two meetings were used to formulate the key themes and issues they wanted to explore in the first focus group interview with the Year 5 children from school B; to plan the session, agreeing which activities to do and allocating roles and tasks; and to rehearse/role play the interview session.

The peer researchers decided that the first focus group interview should explore the ‘hopes and fears’ of the school B children about doing Circle Time and Peer Mentoring for the first time. This arose directly from their reflections on their own experiences explored in session 2. They all remembered feeling anxious, not knowing what to expect and would have liked an opportunity to share these anxieties and to be reassured. It was suggested by one of the
children, and agreed by all, that the interview session should be modelled on Circle Time itself, demonstrating how it works to the school B children.

**Critical reflection 3**

According to Christensen (2004: 174) “the dialogical approach is fruitful and necessary if children are to be actively involved in research”. Therefore a priority at this stage was to establish a relationship with the children whereby I could demonstrate my genuine interest in their perspectives and explore whether my initial research questions made sense to them. Fine and Sandstrom (cited ibid: 173) point to the complex challenges facing researchers who attempt to “straddle the divide between the adult’s and children’s worlds”. I was ever-mindful “that adults doing childhood research should present and perform themselves as an unusual type of adult, one who is seriously interested in understanding how the social world looks from children’s perspective but without making a dubious attempt to be a child” (ibid, 2004: 174). Equally, I was all too aware that for some commentators such a modification of adult identity is seen as naïve or disingenuous. Nevertheless, drawing on feminist research principles, I sought to address the difference of power and status between myself as an adult and the children. This involved working out when to ‘step back’ both figuratively and physically from the discussions, allowing the children’s voices to become more dominant and their deliberations more independent at each stage. The transition was not easy since within the school culture children are used to deferring to adults – looking for their approval or permission. Moreover, as a skilled adult researcher I had to purposefully restrain myself from the tendency to interject with an idea that I thought might work ‘better’! Nevertheless, gradually the children gained the confidence to impose their own agendas on both the research questions and the methodological approach and in so doing the research began to reflect more accurately their priorities and perceptions.

**Doing the research**

The peer researchers conducted the focus group interview in the format of a ‘circle within a circle’ – the school A children occupying the inner circle, demonstrating Circle Time and Peer Mentoring, with the school B children
forming the outer circle, observing. There was then an open ‘question and answer’ exchange with the inner circle turning to face the outer circle. The adult researcher acted as observer and recorder during this first interview session. A debriefing was held after the first group interview. The children were full of enthusiasm and a sense of achievement. For the next two months attention was focused on the use of Circle Time and the development of a peer mentoring programme with the children at school B.

At the end of the programme the peer researchers reconvened to plan and prepare for the follow-up focus group interview at school B. They agreed that purpose of the interview this time was to find out what the school B children thought about, and whether they understood the meaning of, Circle Time and peer mentoring. The peer researchers decided upon the format for the session. The school B children were to be asked to demonstrate Circle Time and peer mentoring to the peer researchers; small group interviews were to be conducted with 2 of the peer researchers talking to 5 or 6 children from school B - 1 researcher to ask questions, 1 to record the answers in a notebook. Again, the questions were formulated by the children themselves. All would then participate in some Circle Time games at the end; and finally the peer researchers would thank school B children for their involvement. This was all executed with the same diligence and enthusiasm that characterised the peer researchers’ first engagement with the school B children.

**Critical reflections 4**

It was noticeable by this stage that the children were even less dependent on the researcher for guidance. They had grown in confidence and had an abundance of ideas for how this phase of the research should be designed and executed. This is consistent with other research demonstrating that children’s competence increases with ‘practice’ (Thomas, 2000). As peer researchers these children demonstrated excellent interpersonal skills and related to each other and the children from school B in a caring and supportive way. They applied these skills to great effect in the interview
process. They were eager and enthusiastic learners and worked incredibly hard to make the research a great success.

Reflecting, analysing and concluding
Two debriefing meetings were held at school A where the peer researchers (i) analysed the data and identified the key messages from the research interviews; and (ii) reflected on their experiences as a peer researcher. Following their focus group sessions with the Year 5 children from School B, the peer researchers collated their fieldnotes and analysed the data looking for the main themes. They produced a short written report in which they summarised their observations and concluded that the children they interviewed had benefited from the peer mentoring programme since there was positive evidence of emotional literacy skills.

In the final focus group session the peer researchers were invited to reflect on their experience of doing peer research. There was unanimous agreement that the experience had been a positive one:

“I got more confidence going to another school and helping them.”
“I liked going to (school B) doing Circle Time and talking to them.”
“I feel more confident. (school B) made you feel welcome.”
“I’ve learned more about other people’s feelings and point of view.”
“It’s brought more confidence for everyone. We felt embarrassed at first, but then it felt better.”
“It felt great doing the research and being asked what we think.”
“I liked doing the interviews best. It made me feel like a grown-up”
“Please can we do it all again?! ”

Critical reflections on stage four
For Mayall (1994) it is in the interpretation phase of the research process that the power differentials between adults and children are most evident. She observes, “however much one may involve children in considering data, the
presentation of it is likely to require analysis and interpretations, at least for some purposes, which do demand different knowledge than that generally available to children” (ibid: 11). Clearly this was an issue for this researcher since the peer research project formed just one part of the overall methodological design for the evaluation. I needed to conduct a meta-analysis of the data derived from the various strands of the evaluation as a whole. Nevertheless, for this aspect of the evaluation, the children’s interpretations and conclusions were authentically represented by the inclusion of their short report as an appendix to the final evaluation report, a draft copy of which was shared with them prior to its submission to the commissioners of the research.

**Final reflections and enduring tensions**

This paper contributes to the growing body of evidence demonstrating children’s capacity for both conceptualising and executing research. Notwithstanding this researcher’s commitment to an epistemological and methodological approach grounded in feminism and the new sociology of childhood, significant tensions remain. In particular, the extent to which the research can claim to have ‘emancipated’ the children who participated, both in terms of ‘voicing’ and the capacity for substantive change in their lives.

For Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) there is danger in valorising participatory over traditional approaches to research since participation does not straightforwardly equate with emancipation. Indeed, they suggest that participatory approaches may just be a different form of colonisation of childhood by adults.

> To encourage children to participate in creating knowledge about themselves is also to encourage them to take part in the processes used to regulate them (ibid: 504).

Hendrick (Public Lecture, Edge Hill University, 2008) has expressed similar concerns regarding the veracity of claims to ‘listening to children’s voices’ in much contemporary children’s research, policy and practice. He observes:

> the danger is that the voices we hear...filtered as they tend to be through adult directed programmes (many of them no doubt well
meaning), are little more than the ventriloquising of our own expectations: they are ‘true’ of us, but not of children. Put another way, the ‘voices’ serve to reflect our progressivism: manifested as consultation and participation – but usually on our terms. Listening to children in this sense is a deceitful action on our part since we chose to order the voices, which rarely poses any kind of threat.

Komoulainen (2007) has also pointed to the “ambiguity of the child’s voice in social research” (p11) and what she terms the “crisis of representation” (p21). She sensibly cautions against over-simplified and/or sensationalised usage of the term ‘voice’.

My position is consistent with that of Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) who remind us that since ‘knowledge’ is relational, any notion that children’s voices are representative of an essential ‘truth’ is misleading. Rather, “children should be approached as experts in their own lives, but not the only experts” (ibid: 511). This opens up the possibility for what I would term ‘meaningful alliances’ between adults and children towards the goal of childhood emancipation in much the same way as some men have embraced and contributed towards the feminist goal of women’s emancipation.

A further significant tension is the extent to which research projects such as this are taken seriously as evidence. The hierarchical ‘evidence based practice’ (EBP) approach is strongly associated with the imperatives of positivism – a paradigm that is inconsistent with the exploration of subjectivities and life worlds. Moreover, it is an approach that is rooted in adult, professional definitions of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Within this context, there is limited scope for the voice of the child to be heard in ways that will lead to structural change, as the voice of the adult researcher or professional ‘expert’ is privileged.¹

Notwithstanding these enduring tensions, it is my view that ‘voicing’ children in research remains fundamentally, like feminism, a project of emancipation.

¹ A full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper and will be discussed elsewhere.
Emancipatory research, derived within the theoretical and methodological approaches of feminism and the new sociology of childhood, has the potential to bring about substantive changes to children’s lives. Ultimately, however, their empowerment will only be achieved through wider structural change in power relationships between adults and children – socially, politically and economically. Unless this happens, children will remain powerless.

References:


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