A question of procedure: The context for ethical relationships in researching in Early Years settings.

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This paper draws on the author’s experience of undertaking social research with young children as part of an Education Doctorate in a number of English Early years settings. The purpose of the research was to explore young children’s inter-subjectivity and how they learned from their peers whilst engaging in child-directed activity in an Early Years setting. The intention was to investigate the children’s behaviour in areas of continuous provision, with no direct adult supervision.

The methodological paradigm was that of ethical symmetry (Dockett et al., 2010) where young children are regarded as having competency and agency equal to adults, albeit one that may present itself in a different form.

One of the requirements of the Ethics Research Committee of the awarding University, required before the research could be undertaken, related to informed consent by parents/carers of the children attending the settings. The Research Ethics committee had requested that communication regarding the research project was posted to the children’s individual home addresses in order to ensure that all potential participants had access to the written information. In doing this, the parents/carers were able to read the written information and make an informed choice as to whether they wished their child to participate in the research study. The information pack included the purpose of the study, contact details of the researcher and a form requesting consent from the parents/carers, for their children to take part.
Thus the Research Ethics committee were aiming to maintain ethical standards of care and attention to ensuring that parents were fully informed before the research took place (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; BERA, 2011).

The method for obtaining this consent however contradicted the usual practice for communication with parents/carers in the settings and one of the settings carried out their customary procedure of giving the children the letters personally and speaking to the parents informally rather than the one required by the research committee. The setting deemed this method or procedure of communication to be more supportive of the parents/carers’ understanding of the research and therefore the cause of less concern. For some parents/carers, the use of the external mail system may have caused anxiety, particularly where there were difficulties in literacy for the parents/carers themselves. Instead of a personal experience and meeting with the researcher, the contact number given, that of a University Phone line, may have proved to be daunting for parents with few pleasurable personal memories of educational institutes.

The research was carried out in two Early years settings, one of which used the external mail system and the other used their normal procedure to inform parents of events in the early years settings. With comparable numbers of children and families, the number of parents refusing consent for their child was two in setting one and one in setting two. Parents did appear able to refuse consent without a concern that this would prejudice their child’s situation in the setting.

The ethnographic examination of practice in the Early Years impacts on the relationships between those individuals in the researched community, the children themselves, parents/carers and the practitioners in the settings. Anning (2010)
suggests that care needs to be taken in order to preserve the primary function of Early years settings, which is to support the learning and development of children from birth to five years old and to collaborate with parents/ carers in order to support them. Engagement with research projects is therefore a secondary function, where the suitability and appropriateness of suggested research needs to be balanced against the requirements of the service users, namely the children and their families. Where the researcher is a practitioner within the setting, an insider, there may be potential conflicts between the professional’s role as serving these requirements and a researcher’s role of examining the research question and the objects of their enquiry. In this case, the researcher was an outsider and this may also give rise to concerns with regard to exposure of practitioners and the children and their families to an independently critical view, with little accountability towards the aims of the organisation.

The methods used to collect data were observations of the children, semi-structured interviews with the practitioners and visual methods of discussion prompts, such as digital photographs and drawings with selected children.

An issue is the use of Observations within early years settings. Observations are a key tool for practitioners in assessment for learning in addition to providing evidence for the individual child Foundation Stage profile, completed when a child is in the Reception (final) year of the Foundation stage (QCA, 2008).

Observations carried out by practitioners for these are intended for the good of the child, in order to support their learning and development, although some would disagree with the efficacy of the Profile in doing this. However observations carried out as part of a research project are qualitatively different, with little or no perceivable
good for the individual child and indeed increasing the likelihood of intrusion, particularly in this case where the children would normally be outside immediate adult presence (Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

However the epistemological stance underpinning the research was that the findings would enable informed practitioners to support children within early years settings to enhance their potential learning gains and their relationships with their peers, so would promote a general collective good rather than individual good. This relative benefit may impact on the child at different levels, including influencing provision for any younger siblings or later any children of the child (Ibid). This reflects one of the ongoing concerns in sociological research, that of the individualistic and collectivist nature of society (Corsaro, 2011).

The protocols in place for communication require careful consideration as part of the research design and this is particularly evident where the participants in the research project are signposted as vulnerable. Young children are regarded as vulnerable due to their lack of experience but here it may be that the parent/carer relationship with and for the child causes a difficulty for those outside the setting to appreciate the careful nuances of respectful relationships, including a preferred mode of communication.

Whilst the Early years foundation stage practice guidance advocates a philosophical stance towards parents, recognising parents as their child’s first educators (DCSF, 2008), nevertheless this stands at odds with the notion of Early learning goals that children are required to meet. The norms for education are therefore set fully within the requirements of the setting as stated in the Early learning goals, not within the aims and intentions of the parents of the child.
The ethics under consideration in this case study research project cannot therefore be seen to be ‘regardless’ of age and other characteristics which may impact on equality issues as advocated by Ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011) but actually actively need to take these into account with the recognition that ethical constructs of vulnerability within the research process have a dynamic status, with a specific historical socio-cultural context at a micro-analysis level. Each of the settings in the research project were located geographically in areas of high socio-economic deprivation in the North-West of England and this context must be taken into account within the research process as well as the early education and care experience provided for the children and their families by the settings.

A recent research project carried out by Mensah and Kiernan (2010) examined the interplay between parental mental health and child progress, so that lower attainment in communication, language and literacy, mathematical development and personal, social and emotional development in the Foundation stage profile was evident among children, whose parents were experiencing mental health issues, such as psychological distress and stress. In order to support families in this situation, the practitioners need a sensitive, non-judgemental, relationship with the parents, unsullied by parental concerns that practitioners are assessing their parenting qualities, assessing their ability as their child’s first educators and finding them wanting. Adding a tertiary level of researcher to this must be acknowledged within the process.

This paper advocates a re-evaluation of the legacy of the bio-medical model of ethics within social research in education settings, so that education research may be fully located within ethnographic practice. Whilst bio-medical ethics has a long
history of ensuring beneficence and duty of care to research participants, this has often been situated within an interventionist, positivist paradigm.

Therefore Ethnographic research should aim to build on bioethics so as to encompass the rich descriptions of the contextualised lives of real people, taking account of how they build and maintain their relationships, ‘a mirror rather than a knife’. Here respect is afforded to those participants in research as participative objects of the research itself, including its design, so that their concerns, their engagements become part of the driving force of the enquiry. This includes the children, their parents/carers and the practitioners, recognising modes of communication as a key process in ethnographic research and enabling a reciprocal connection between researchers and researched community.

References


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