



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

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INFORMED CONSENT

Using magnets to visualise informed consent in school-based fieldwork with children

Background context:

With my PhD research I wanted to explore how ethnicity, gender and social class intersect in young children's social identities and relationships in a culturally diverse primary school. This research focus suggested a methodology that would allow me to spend time with, observe and talk to children during their everyday life at school.

I started out by searching through research and contact networks for a school that met the criteria for my research (in terms of cultural diversity etc.) and that was, in principle, interested in taking part. I then applied for ethical permission to conduct my research from my university's ethics board, the local city council, the head teacher of the school, the class teachers involved and the parents of the class in which I wanted to conduct the research. After successfully achieving all these ethical procedures, I embarked on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in a Primary 1 class with 25 5-6 year-old children with whom I also needed to negotiate consent.

The ethical challenge:

As a novice researcher I had read widely about the importance, but also the challenges of informed consent, and was eager to find a way to allow the children an informed and ongoing choice about whether or not to take part in my research. I was also concerned about the children's place at the bottom of the 'consent hierarchy' described above, and was keen to find a way to engage them in a meaningful consent procedure.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, I used a rather traditional, contractual model of informed consent: I had prepared a colourful booklet, which I handed out to all children while we were sitting in a circle. Talking through it, I introduced myself, explained my research and answered their questions. A few days later we revisited the booklet and continued the conversation, and this time I invited them to place a sticker (of which I had provided a few with every booklet) on the last page if they wanted to take part in the research. I also stressed that it was fine to change their minds about this at any time over the following months.

Most of the children agreed to take part and I began to increase the frequency of my visits until I came into the class almost every day. I came to know the children better and it soon emerged that some were keener than others to interact, talk and play with me. However, I did not know if this was because they wanted to take part in the research, or because they wanted to spend time with me as an 'unusual adult' (Christensen, 2004). I also wasn't sure whether those children who did *not* seek much contact with me, did not want to take part in the research, were shy of approaching me, or had some other reason for avoiding contact. I also noticed that a number of explanations about my

presence were circulating in the class, for example that I wanted to write a children's book or that I wanted to learn how to become a teacher.

Our initial conversations, the booklet and stickers seemed to have drifted out of the children's memory, and I felt unsatisfied about the transparency of the research process, my role as a researcher, and the children's informed consent to it. I addressed these issues whenever they arose in conversations with individual or groups of children, but felt that I needed to make the research process more explicit for the whole group. I was striving to clarify my role as a researcher, to prompt the children to consider their options and choices, and to find a way to communicate these to me.

Choices made:

After a few weeks of fieldwork, I introduced a visual magnet model inspired by Gallagher's (2009) colour-coded stickers worn by children on their clothes. All children received a magnetic picture of themselves and I invited them to express their ongoing opting in or out by moving it on the designated spaces on a surface in the classroom. The teachers supported the idea and, since the class generally worked in groups moving freely around work stations in the room, the children were encouraged to walk up to the magnet board and change the position of their picture throughout the day.

Context and compliance: At the beginning, the magnets were a novelty in the classroom, received much attention, and were used very frequently. Many children seemed to enjoy being given the power to say 'no' to an adult. However, perhaps not surprisingly in the context of the school, opting in was often associated with being 'good' and opting out with being 'naughty'. Some children, for example, pointed out that they had opted in and others had opted out, and I continuously stressed that both choices were fine.

Managing different roles and demands: Sometimes children seemed to feel the need to explain to me why they decided to opt in or out. From this it became clear that the children managed and prioritised their roles and responsibilities in the classroom. Some, for example, distinguished between educational tasks and exercises on the one hand, and spending time with and talking to me on the other hand. In conversations it became clear that some perceived taking part in the research as an additional 'weight' on their already intense schedule at school, whereas others viewed interactions with me as having a more playful or leisurely aspect, which they kept separated from educational demands.

Relationships and consent: As already noted above, many children pointed out and commented not only on their own, but also on other children's consent decisions. Initially, this led to a tangible pressure in the group to opt in, which decreased over time as opting out became more 'acceptable'. Groups of friends also debated and made their decisions together and so consent became as much a group as individual process.

Power differences: a one-way process? After a few months, one girl approached me and said: 'I wanted to talk to you yesterday, but you were not here'. This made me realise that, while the magnet system was supposed to encourage the children's active participation in the research process, it was ultimately still conceived and controlled by me as an adult researcher. The children, however, had been more sensitive to how my taken-for-granted practices were permeated by power differences. This one-way process was illustrated further when some of the children started to adapt the magnets to my

presence in the classroom: when I was there, they opted in, and when I was not in school, they opted out.

Reflexive questions/considerations:

In retrospect, I think that the movable magnets fulfilled their purpose in terms of making the research process more visible and encouraging the children to reflect on and communicate whether they wanted to opt in or out. It also allowed some insights into how the children made these decisions by managing their different roles and tasks in the school context.

However, the magnets also illustrated the complexity of informed consent in ethnographic fieldwork. Relationships, both among the children, and between children and researcher(s), as well as children's/participants' and adults'/researchers' different positions of authority and power, make informed consent a complex process. It goes beyond contractual and institutional models and challenges researchers to continuously reflect on and adapt their approaches:

- How does the context of our research impact on the ways in which children and young people can opt in or out?
- What are our taken-for-granted assumptions about consent, power and participation in research, both as adults and researchers, behind our research design and ethical procedures?
- How might the children and young people involved in our research experience and interpret these procedures?
- How can we ensure that we listen to their voices and are flexible in our approaches while conducting our research?

References

Christensen, P.H. (2004) Children's Participation in Ethnographic Research: Issues of Power and Representation, *Children & Society*, 18, 165–176.

Gallagher, M (2009) Researching the Geography of Power in a Primary School, in *Researching with Children and Young People. Research Design, Methods and Analysis*, edited by EKM Tisdall, JM Davis and M Gallagher. Sage: London, 57-64.

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