

INFORMED CONSENT

Using the Narrative Approach to informed consent to empower young children and their educators

Background context:

Conducting research with young children is a complex process with many stakeholders and ethical considerations to navigate. One of the most enduring challenges we tend to encounter is how to engage young children in a meaningful way, and how to bring rights-based theory and children's active and engaged research participation together into a workable approach. In response to this challenge, we developed the 'Narrative Approach', which we have now been refining over several years (Mayne & Howitt, 2019, 2022; Mayne, Howitt, & Rennie, 2016, 2018a). This is a story-based approach that emphasises 'understanding' as an important component of young children's high-quality research participation. What we have come to realise is that it is not only the understanding of the young children that is important, but also the understanding of those who facilitate the research.

The 'Narrative Approach' promotes informed consent as a valuable relationship-building process that is integral to the overarching aims of a research project. This Approach uses an 'informing story' about the research to introduce young children to their participation rights and other abstract ethical concepts. Drawing from contemporary rights-based theory, Narrative Approach-based Informing Stories emphasise the provision of information, understanding, voice and influence in a format that is child-orientated, respectful, engaging and participatory (Mayne et al., 2018a).

Informing Stories tend to use interactive technologies (such as iPads) and interactive reading strategies (such as dialogic reading) to create and deliver a story about the "context and purpose of the research project, methods of data collection, potential dissemination, and the voluntary nature of research participation" (Mayne & Howitt, 2022, p. 9). Another key characteristic of an Informing Story is that it is created using photographs of the people, places and events that the child is likely to encounter during his or her participation. When this is updated and printed as a take-home storybook, the child becomes a character in their own research 'story' and their parents become partners in their



child's research journey (Mayne et al., 2016; Mayne, Howitt, & Rennie, 2017). Thus, the time and effort invested into the ethics process in this way has the potential to directly affect how young children experience their research participation (Mayne, Howitt, & Rennie, 2018b).

The ethical challenge:

Our current research explores 4-year-old children's outdoor learning in an early childhood education and care setting in Perth, Western Australia, and how the outdoor program could be improved. We were interested in the children's perspectives of, and their input into, student-centred and inquiry-driven learning experiences in informal outdoor learning environments. The children used iPads to record their ideas and experiences through photos, video and audio recordings whilst engaging in outdoor 'expeditions', and as a reflection tool after the expedition.

An initial ethical challenge we faced was how to inspire the centre staff, who were partners in the research, to establish a respectful research culture where the child participants would be afforded opportunities for 'more voice' (Henaghan, 2017) and to be "properly researched" (Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2009, p. 370). Informing stories support the concept of being properly researched by creating a "conceptual ethical space" where the worlds of researchers, staff and young children can meet on common ground (Mayne & Howitt, 2022, p. 4). We wanted all stakeholders to be able to reflect together on their perceptions, convictions and intentions within the research and reach negotiated understandings about the children's participation, in addition to improving the children's outdoor learning program.

Choices made:

Joint creation of a digital Informing Story for this outdoor learning project helped to facilitate these negotiated understandings. First, as an informing and consent tool, the story facilitated the provision of accurate and child-appropriate information to be provided to the children about the research and their role as participants. It enabled researchers to check for understanding and supported each child to make an autonomous choice about his or her participation, along with opportunities for their ongoing consent or dissent.

There was also an unexpected benefit that flowed from the process of co-developing the story with the centre staff and the children. The development of the Informing Story required a storyline to be written and images created that illustrated this particular research project's aim and what involvement of children,



educators and researchers would entail. In close collaboration with the research team, several iterations of the story were produced as the educators and children learned about the rights-based participatory research process, the various considerations that needed to be included and translated abstract ideas into language and images that 4-year-old children could relate to. This process also served to fine tune the parameters of the research.

We found that including the centre director and the educators in this design phase resulted in a clarity of research intentions, and a strong working relationship between the centre staff and the researchers, even before data collection had commenced. Once the formal ethics and initial informed consent processes had been completed, and data collection was underway, it was clear that the Informing Story had served to broadly clarify expectations of the research for the educators, the children and their parents (who received a take-home copy) and provided common ground for understanding.

Reflexive questions / considerations:

One of the questions we found ourselves asking early in the research was, how much time will the informed consent process take? We had committed to making children's rights a priority, and we were aware that practical support for the children's participation from the educators would be needed. Providing a conceptual ethical space via the Informing Story was also an important part of our methodology. All these things were important to us as rights-based researchers, but it was hard to pinpoint the actual length of time that it would take. We planned for this part of the research to take a couple of weeks, but when some challenges arose, we needed to be flexible and extend our dates. The centre staff and children used a story template that we provided to them to create their own Informing Story, but the writing and photographing for their own version took around 3 weeks. It needed to go back and forth between the educators and the researchers several times as it evolved over several iterations.

Our meetings around the story, as we have pointed out previously, were wonderful opportunities for relationship-building, and built up a sense of ownership of the story and the research for the educators and children. As it turned out, the centre experienced a number of staff changes, so some images in the Informing Story had to then be re-taken, and we had to start some aspects of the research over again with a new leader of the outdoor program. This further extended our timeline. However, in this scenario, the Informing Story proved to be a huge advantage because it allowed the new educators to understand what the research was about and what would be expected from the children. The Informing Story supported educators to recognise the children as competent

research partners, and as capable co-constructors and interpreters of their world; research concepts that they had not necessarily encountered previously. Therefore, although it was a time-consuming process, we felt that the development of the Informing Story was ethically and educationally invaluable.

Finally, while it is never easy to know if participants and facilitators in research projects are *really* left empowered by participatory research processes, we believe that the Informing Story offered a conduit to empower the educators involved to take a unified approach to supporting the children in their research journey. Striving towards this, we found it was important to be both reflexive and reflective throughout the process to ensure that the original ethical ideals around the quality of the children's participation continued to come through strongly in everything the researchers and educators did. As the children and educators became engaged in collecting data, we needed to come back multiple times to the original research aims and participation principles to adjust the research direction and the strategies we used. This involved allowing time to listen and to guide. This was an important step, as the researchers were not the prime initiators of data collection. It was the educators who co-developed the outdoor learning experiences with the children, and it was the children who predominantly collected data using iPads. We found that it was important to go back to the Informing Story and ask the children (and the educators) if what they were finding out was answering the research question (how to improve the outdoor learning program). It was all of these considerations combined – the respect, the time, the co-construction, the relationship-building, the listening, the agency, and the ongoing quest for understanding – that was integral to creating a shared ethical space that we believe empowered both the children and their educators in this research.

In reflecting on your own research contexts, perhaps you would like to consider the following:

- Is taking a Narrative Approach worth the investment in time it requires?
- What are the drivers, enablers and constraints of a narrative-based approach to informed consent?
- How might the Narrative Approach to informed consent be used to simultaneously expand young children's understanding of their participation rights and support their learning?
- How might this approach be adapted for other types of social or educational research with young children? Or research with children in other disciplines?
- How might this approach support the participation of even younger children (perhaps with additional adult support)? And if so, how young?



- Could the Narrative Approach have value for older children, or other research participants?

Some of the questions and issues outlined in this case study can be found in our recently published book, *The Narrative Approach to Informed Consent: Empowering Young Children's Rights and Meaningful Participation* (Mayne & Howitt, 2022).

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