

INFORMED CONSENT

Embracing the embarrassment: Potential of seemingly unsuccessful research interactions for critical professional development

Background context:

When children participate in research, particularly research conducted with or by children, a key goal is to authentically represent their viewpoints. Striving for authentic representation involves being critical and reflexive of power dynamics and adultism across content, methodology and ethics (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; Graham et al., 2013; Shier, 2019). Beyond pre-planned decisions, in-situ ethical challenges inevitably arise and require prompt attention. Sometimes, these ad hoc actions or decisions lead to situations or interactions that may feel “not good,” “suboptimal,” or “unsuccessful” even during the process and may have a negative impact afterwards. It can be tempting to categorise these interactions as awkward, unpleasant or embarrassing in terms of our research abilities, our own image as a reflective researcher or as “unproductive” for addressing the original research objectives, and exclude them from our dataset. However, through our research we have come to advocate for the importance of systematically analysing and reflecting on “ethically important moments” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) in research conversations with children. As highlighted in our publications (Velten & Höke, 2023; Höke & Velten, 2024), these reflections significantly enhance not only our own but also other researchers' competencies, particularly in fostering a critical approach towards power dynamics and adultism.

In this case study we draw on an example from an educational research setting in Germany. The example comes from a study investigating children's views on their self-efficacy during the transition from daycare to primary school using diverse methods inspired by the Mosaic Approach (Velten, 2022). In addition to analysing the data in relation to the project focus, we also analysed the data from an ethical standpoint to uncover different interaction patterns between researchers and children (Höke & Velten, 2024; Velten & Höke, 2023). From this “interaction data,” we share a segment of a research interview transcript that felt “unproductive” and “unsuccessful” and critically analyse what it offers for the professional development of childhood researchers.



The ethical challenge:

Children may bring their own agendas and interests to research encounters. As such, even when using participatory and creative methods, children may discuss topics which feel irrelevant or beyond the scope of the study, diverting or even derailing data collection. The challenge for researchers working with young children is how to manage these diversions so as not to shut down children's participation, while also collecting relevant data (Velton & Höke, 2023).

In the segment below, we share part of a research conversation from the second data collection point of our study. This data collection point began with children taking photos using disposable cameras with the instruction, "Capture what you can influence in the daycare centre/school." Both the child and interviewer were seeing the photos for the first time at the start of the interview through analog photo production¹. It became apparent that Mila, a first grade primary school student, had taken the camera home and captured many photographs from her life outside of school. Mila and the researcher were already acquainted from the daycare centre (where a similar interview occurred during the initial data collection) and had been conversing for about 15 minutes.

Interviewer: Mhh. And who determines things the most here at school?

Mila: The teachers.

I: Why is that so? What's your idea?

Mila: Mhh. [Scratches her neck with her hand] I don't know. But I definitely want to talk about something from home now. [Picks up a photo]. Dad, what are you doing in this picture? [Laughs] Look at how he's looking there. [Shows the photo to interviewer].

I: Mhh.

Mila: [Mimics the expression in the photo] Silly old sock. [Laughs].

I: Can children here at school also have a say in things? [Mila shakes her head]. Only the teachers or adults here, or how does it work?

Mila: I don't know, nothing comes to mind right now. Can I tell something now? [Holds up the photo].

I: You can tell me in a moment. [...] We already know each other from kindergarten. [Interviewer places pictures of the daycare entrance and school entrance stuck on an arrow on the table].

¹ Instead of digital cameras, the children in the project used disposable cameras, which function similarly to a traditional camera in terms of their capabilities. Pictures cannot be viewed instantly as with digital cameras; they need to be developed first.

Mila: Can I say something quickly? [Becomes focused on the arrow]. Okay then we'll do that later [puts her picture away].

I: You can tell me that at the end. Shall we agree on that?

Mila: Mhh [nodding] yes. But what should I do now?

(Mila, t2 1st grade primary school)

Choices made:

This example sequence contributed to the researcher's overall perception of the interview as "not good," "unproductive" or even "failed". We can see that initially, the interviewer, driven by her interest in children's participation possibilities in the school context, seeks Mila's assessment and explanations. However, the interviewer's prompts do not elicit a substantive response from Mila (repeated responses of "I don't know"). Simultaneously, a second interaction strand emerges from Mila (wanting to discuss some things from home). Building on the displayed photos, she expresses a strong need for interaction. She conveys her interest through facial expressions and gestures, actively bringing her own photos and agenda into focus during the interview. Mila's choice of words, sentence structure, and actions portray agency, confidence, and determination.

This ethically important moment calls for a decision on the interviewer's part. She must swiftly decide which priority to follow: prioritising the research focus and potential data quality by keeping the conversation focused on the research topic OR respecting the child's participation by following her interests and remaining open to the potential that the child might have something relevant to share about the research topic. In the example sequence, Mila's request for conversation is not acknowledged by the interviewer; one could even argue it is ignored as the researcher redirects the conversation without responding to what Mila says about the photo of her Dad. Only after Mila persistently expresses her own interest ('Can I tell something now?'), does the researcher attempt to postpone discussing it until later in the interview, refocusing the conversation on the research topic supported by a visual aid (the photos on the arrow). This pattern of shifting topics, termed as a practice of organising and structuring (Velten & Höke, 2023), is repeated once more ('You can tell me at the end') after Mila reiterates her need for interaction ('Can I say something quickly?'). Unlike her initial statement, Mila's subsequent statements are questioning and address the interviewer in the role as a decision-maker in this setting ('Can I tell something now?' / 'Can I say something quickly?').

This pattern of questioning and permitting has been extensively analyzed by Velten (2022) regarding its foundation and impact on conversation progression. It emerges as a habitualised interaction pattern between adults and children used to maintain generational order. Ultimately, it could be interpreted that Mila complies competently (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020) by acquiescing easily when she says, 'Okay then we'll do that later' and puts her picture away, leading to an agreement (at the end of the segment) to address her conversation interest later on.

This example illustrates an interaction likely perceived as uncomfortable and unsuccessful from both participants' perspectives. The researcher's ad hoc actions of ignoring the child's conversation topic and insisting on her own research questions led to the child refusing substantive engagement. This also triggers habitualised adult-child interaction patterns in both parties that subsequently fail to uphold either inherent research principles or respect for children's interests and perspectives. Consequently, this undermines the potential of intentionally starting with children's photos as an interaction catalyst.

Reflexive questions / considerations:

Diversions inevitably arise in research encounters with young children, including children seeking to shift the focus of the conversation. While such ethical dilemmas arise in-situ, we can prepare ourselves by considering in advance how we might manage them. Managing diversions in a relationally respectful, but productive way, is key.

- How might the researcher have managed the above interaction differently?
- What might have happened had the researcher followed the child's conversation interest?
- How can researchers balance the needs of the study with those of participating child/ren?
- How can we better reduce adult adult-centric interaction in adult-determined research?

Engaging in discourse around these issues is crucial to professionalising participatory research with children. Together we can discuss our approaches, interpretations and ideas and improve research practice. Currently, we are deeply engaging with this and addressing fundamental ethical questions and dilemmas in research involving primary school children within the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) funded Research Network



"Ethics in Participatory Research with Children," collaborating with researchers from diverse disciplines across Germany, Switzerland and the UK (<https://www.ash-berlin.eu/en/research/research-projects-from-a-z/pafoki/>). We welcome researchers, practitioners, and children to get in touch with us.

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