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Original Citation

Denby, Neil (2006) Ethical and other considerations of research with children – a proposed methodology. Discussion Paper. Excellence in Cities. (Unpublished)

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**Ethical and other considerations of research with
children – a proposed methodology.**

June 2006

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Abstract

The study to which this paper refers examines the collaboration between a group of PGCE Business Education trainees at an HEI and a cohort of gifted and talented pupils at a local secondary school, which takes place as part of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) approach to encourage children into higher education.. The researcher sets out to explore the particular ethical problems of research with children, particularly within the ethnographic context of the research. A method to militate against problems is proposed.

Introduction

Participants in the study include two institutions – the school and the HEI – and four groups of interested people. These four are: staff at the HEI, PGCE trainees; staff at the secondary school and the gifted and talented cohort. There are also external bodies whose expert knowledge can be used to help support the research aims, such as the Training and Development Agency (TDA), which, through Ofsted, assesses the competency and value of the teacher training course, and the Ofsted evaluations of the secondary school. Choosing a method by which to conduct the research was important, as it can affect both the quality and the direction of the research (Hitchcock and Hughes 1989). The choice of methodology may, of course, be influenced by what is currently acceptable in the research community:

The research community has endowed certain procedural rules with the authority to certify knowledge as reliable and objective. If these rules are not followed, the knowledge can be impugned as unreliable; and one sure way to undermine results is to criticise the methods used to obtain them. (Brewer, 2000. p.2)

As Cohen et al rightly state:

The social and educational world is a messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity, connectedness, conjunctions and disjunctions. It is multilayered, and not easily susceptible to the atomization process inherent in much numerical research. It has to be studied in total rather than in fragments if a true understanding is to be reached. (Cohen et al 2007:167)

The chosen methodology for this research was ethnographic in nature, so this required the researcher to develop this relationship or become an influence on the research group. If adopting a positivistic, natural science, stance, the researcher would not be allowed to influence outcomes or ‘muddy the waters’ (Brewer 0000). Social research, and social

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research methods and methodology, spring from two very different interpretations which, according to some commentators, have produced a conflict in the research world which has *dominated the entire history of the philosophy of social sciences (Carr and Kemmis, 1986:105)*. The first of these opposing viewpoints posits that research in social science can be conducted using the tools of physical science. The 'scientific method' of observation, repetition and control can be applied to social situations. This view has been variously referred to as *positivist, hypothetico-deductive or experimental* (Henwood and Pigeon, 1992). Ethnography sits firmly in the opposite camp, labelled by the same authors as '*naturalistic, contextual or interpretative*'. In this world, the researcher sees society as a construct born out of and defined by human action and interaction.

Social or scientific?

Social research should not be trying to emulate scientific research, in posing a hypothesis to be proven or disproven, but should be able to reflect on (and even participate in) social situations in order to understand what is happening in the situation and why. The researcher as part of the collaborative partnership, and the peer-to-peer interaction of both trainees and pupils is thus part of a long 'interpretative' tradition (Carr and Kemmis 1986; ,Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Bartlett et al 2001). The role of the researcher in this case is of an ethnographic participant-observer who sees and understands what happens. Ethnographic investigation is particularly useful in educational settings and has made *a significant contribution* (LeCompte 2002). Being central to, and even a part of, the actions and interactions being observed does, however, present a particular ethical problem – especially when the research subjects are children.

The ethics of research with children.

Because of the nature of the research, some respondents were, inevitably, children of school age. This raises certain difficulties. There are a number of ethical issues to consider which are particularly germane to research with children, including participant consent and the power relationship between the adult researcher and the child subject. In addition, when planning the data collection, analysis and interpretation, the researcher became particularly

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aware that there could be difficulties in relying on the evidence of children as being accurate and valid.

Commentators suggest that reliability and validity can be enhanced by allowing children to participate in research with a greater degree of freedom. According to Kefalyew (1996:204) the reliability of research is dependent in children as a target group on *the degree of freedom they enjoy to take part actively in a research process*. Thomas and O’Kane (1998:343)

similarly comment that:

The use of these participatory techniques greatly assisted in breaking down imbalances of power, not only by giving children greater control over the agenda and more time and space to talk about the issues that concern them, but also by creating an atmosphere in which there were no right or wrong answers and even some opportunities for children to interpret and explain their own data.

Children as research subjects present clear ethical problems for the researcher (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Christensen and James 2000). The children must be able to understand the nature and purpose of the research, and to be in a position to withdraw or decide not to participate at any time. This can only be achieved within the notion of ‘informed consent’ (Alderson, 1995, Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). The most important aspect of research with children is sensitivity to the balance of power (Morrow and Richards, 1996, Valentine, 1999). Morrow and Richards (1996:98) are of the opinion that

the biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the disparities in power and status between adults and children

Adult vs Child

An adult researcher is immediately and ‘naturally’ in a position of power over a child respondent, physically, intellectually and by status. This can colour all the responses so that the child only delivers that which s/he feels is ‘expected’ or ‘right’, rather than a genuine response. Researchers have explored various methods by which frankness may be encouraged. Internet based discussion, for example (Kitchin and Tate, 2000), or a ‘phone-in’ type radio programme (Weller, 2006) but even here, the power lies in the hands of the internet moderator or the radio phone-in host (Barnard, 2000). These, by the nature of their anonymity, might even generate more suspicion in the respondents.

Three central principles.

Mertens (1998) states that ethical issues should always be integral to research. The three main ethical principles are explained in Bassey (1999). By planning the work within the constraints suggested, the research will be entirely ethical in nature. These are described as 'responsibilities' in O'Leary (2004). With this research, however, there is also an imperative to ensure that children are treated with respect, and that an attempt is made to ensure that their responses are genuine and valid. Bassey (1999) suggests three ethical principles: respect for democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons.

O'Leary (2004), in addition, suggests responsibility for the production of knowledge and responsibility for the researcher. Under the heading of 'responsibilities for the production of knowledge' O'Leary (2004) identifies four subheadings

- Recognising, understanding and balancing subjectivity,
- Accurate reporting
- Acting within the law and
- Developing appropriate expertise and experience

The first three of these are even more essential when dealing with child participants. It is easy for the adult researcher to interpret their responses in a subjective way, or even to encourage them to respond in a particular vein. Under the second heading identified by O'Leary, '*responsibility for the researcher*' it is essential for the researcher to be both part of the child's world (to maintain the ethnographic stance) and yet to be sufficiently distanced from it.

The following sub headings show the ethical responsibilities to be taken into consideration when dealing with participants

- *Respecting the rights of cultural groups*
- *Ensuring respondents have given informed consent*
 - Competent:-*
 - Autonomous:-*
 - Involved Voluntarily:-*
 - Aware of the right to discontinue:-*
 - Not deceived:-*
 - Not coerced:-*
 - Not induced:-*
- *Ensuring no harm has come to the respondents*
- *Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity,*

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This accords with O'Leary's responsibility for the production of knowledge, especially the exhortations to accuracy and subjectivity.

To accord with Bassey's first principle, respect for democracy, the researcher must give equal weight to all participant views and ensure that the situation for each interview or focus group is unlikely to adversely affect its outcome. Within the realm of this principle, it was seen as important to make sure that data collection took place in a neutral situation that would not adversely affect the outcome. Venues are therefore chosen carefully to ensure that there would be no interruption, and conversations and feedback should all be collected in comfortable and relaxed environments.

All participants should also be given the opportunity to decline to take part in the study. This opportunity should particularly and deliberately be extended to pupil participants so that it is they, rather than gatekeepers, who make the final decisions as to whether or not to participate (and in what detail). Other groups, such as colleagues at each institution and the parents and guardians of pupils, are also kept informed. Cullingford and Morrison (1999:256) explain that:

Parents are not only seen as 'primary educators' but necessarily 'involved' and engaged. ...the school cannot work in isolation...

Informed consent – from whom?

Because many of the participants in the study were children, it was necessary for the researcher to obtain '*informed consent*' from the appropriate '*gatekeepers*' (Alderson 1995, Oliver 2003). The main gatekeeper for school trainees is the Headteacher at the school, who was asked and gave written consent for the research to take place. He had shown a deal of interest in the progress of the research and received research notes and papers that have been written and presented at conferences. He sees the influence of the University and of the project as a major plus and has cited the positive influence in school brochures. The relationship has also been cited positively in Ofsted reports on the school. (q.v.)

In regard to the second principle, respect for truth, interviews should be tape-recorded with the clear permission of interviewees themselves (not gatekeepers) being sought before recording commenced. Such recording happens overtly. In situations where recording is not

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practicable, field notes are taken, again openly, and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. The recordings should be transcribed verbatim, extracts are referred to where appropriate and child respondents allowed to comment on their accuracy.

With regard to the third principle, respect for persons, all participants and institutions should be rendered anonymous and respondents' identities protected. All participants, not just children, should be given the opportunity to decline to take part in the study at any stage. Respondents are not interviewed without giving informed consent and the opportunity to withdraw at any time. Here, it was also particularly important to establish that child respondents understood what was being asked of them and to what use the data would be put. It was also essential that, with regard to the third principle, particular care was taken with child participants.

Adult or child respondents?

With respondents who are children of school age there are a number of additional ethical issues to address. For example, it is important that cognisance is taken of the vulnerable nature of some of the participants – as children, they need to be treated carefully (Mauthner, 1997; Thomas and O'Kane 1998). There may also be question marks over validity. When planning the data collection and analysis, the researcher was particularly aware of possible difficulties in relying on the validity of pupil evidence. The key to validity in this case lies with the view that the researcher takes of children as respondents. Are they essentially adult respondents, but with less experience and vocabulary with which to express themselves, or are they inhabitants of a different world, who need a specifically designed and targeted approach?

Which view or perception is adopted by the researcher influences how data are handled and interpreted. If children are seen as '*essentially indistinguishable from adults*' (James et al., 1998: 31) then normal adult methods will be used. This assumes that children will behave and respond as adults and views/opinions should be held to be equal. If, however, children are seen as different, then an ethnographic approach is valid. The difficulty with using this approach is that it often relies on participant observation as a research strategy, in many cases without recognizing that adults are unable to be full participants in children's social

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worlds because they can never truly be children again (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Hill, 1997; Taylor 2002). This is a criticism of ethnography that is recognised as particularly apposite to research with children. As Hey (1997:68) found:

...field relations at Eastford were complicated by ... the circumstances of the school, the nature of the project (privileging girls) as well as by the choice of fieldwork method (participant observation).

If children are seen as similar to adults but likely to have different skills and different ways to express themselves (James et al., 1998: 189) the researcher needs ways to access those skills. Hence data collection devices such as worksheets and sentence completion (Morrow 1999), pictures and diaries (Nesbitt 2000) and even radio workshops (Hecht 1998) have been proposed.

Children may have a tendency to lie or evade for reasons that may not be immediately apparent to the researcher. For instance: lack of knowledge (or an opinion) – children are used to having things ‘done to’ them rather than being asked what they want ‘to do’. They may also lie through a desire to create favourable impressions (Ennew, 1994; Richman, 1993; Gersch, 1996). Can the researcher ‘really believe’ children’s accounts of their experiences (Morrow, 1999) unless they become familiar with their subjects.

Lies and evasions are less likely when a researcher has built up a relationship of trust with children (Ennew, 1994: 57).

Bassey’s third principle ‘respect for persons’, is here seen as vital. It is recognised that research with a group of children – even a group designated as ‘gifted and talented’, raises different issues to research with adults. In terms of informed consent, for example, permission for participation needs to be sought from both adult ‘gatekeepers’ (parents and school) and the children. However, the final decision on participation must always be left to rest solely with the pupil respondent. Other issues also arise, for example, to ensure that questions are phrased so that children can understand them and so that they contain no bias. It is easy for a researcher to misinterpret a question, or a response, or both. It was also essential that children were interviewed on equal terms with adult respondents – so that their views carry equal weight.

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The positivist position would be that children as respondents could be considered to be the same as any other physical force and thus treated as if they will always behave in the same way. Their behaviour (stimulus-response, or similar) in any given set of circumstances can be determined, predicted and replicated, much as a physical scientist would set out to repeat an experiment. The positivist would build a hypothesis that could state, for example, that 'gifted and talented children are more likely to be good at sport', test the hypothesis on a small study and then apply the results in a general fashion. Children, however, are even less likely than adults to conform as expected. According to Grieg and Taylor (1999:35):

The trouble with doing research with human subjects – as opposed to forces, fossils and feathered animals – is that both the researcher and research participant have a conceptualization of the research situation and what is expected to happen. ... the control of a positivist investigation is seriously undermined by the possibility of a human, subjective conceptualisation of the research situation on the part of both researcher and participant. Not only does the researcher need to contend with how the participant perceives and responds to the research situation, he is also dealing with a personality who could, unintentionally or otherwise, sabotage the entire exercise.

The approach taken by this research may therefore be considered constructivist rather than positivist. Constructivist researchers see the child as *subjective, contextual, self-determining and dynamic* (Grieg and Taylor 1999:37). This involves describing and interpreting behaviour. Although quantitative measures can be used to achieve some form of triangulation, the interpretation of actions and outcomes in a qualitative way is of greater significance. *Instead of measuring, correlating and predicting*, constructivists describe and interpret (Hatch 1995:122)

Within the research paradigm of the sociology of childhood there is an acknowledgement of need for interpretation to construct meanings. There is also a recognition that the research task is not limited to unearthing one 'true' meaning.

Validity and child respondents

There are many different methodologies designed to improve both responses and the validity of responses with child respondents. These have been developed across different disciplines, including health, welfare and education. Greig and Taylor (1999) list several classic ways of doing research with children, and several special ways. Classic methods include observation of various sorts, correlation, experimentation, surveys, case studies and ethnography. Special ways include testing and task development, assessment of development, psychobiological measures, cognitive tasks and tests, socio-cognitive and socio-emotional tasks, interviews and questionnaires. Other avenues may also be used, for example photographs, drawing and diaries (Barker and Weller 2003). The description of a study (Martin et al, 2002:121) carried out by 21 teachers in London and China is typical of the research instruments used; for teachers the use of questionnaires, vignette case studies, observation, journals, and/or focus

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groups; for children, non-verbal exercises, discussion prompts, group investigations and activities.

Although the list is long, it is not, however, exhaustive, and there is no suggestion that any of the problems, as perceived by Punch (2000), are being tackled. The closest any method comes to breaking down the barriers between child and researcher is that of participant observation where

The observer becomes a friend with her subjects and interacts with them in the most trusted way possible. (Greig and Taylor 1999:88)

Such friendships however are rare, and the power differential between child respondent and adult remains. Children need to be convinced that teachers and adults other than teachers:

... are really interested in what they have to say [and] that their views will be given careful consideration... (Ruddock and Flutter 2001:2)

An ethnographic approach is likely to be predicated on the use of participant observation, which may be described as the practice of doing research by joining in the life of the social group or institution that is being researched (McKernan, 1996). Here, however, is the major problem linked to research with children, and it is

... that adults are unable to be full participants in children's social worlds because they can never fully be children again. (Punch 2000:322).

Within their own worlds, children are the most knowledgeable and expert 'members of the community' (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000:76) so why not use them as researchers?

The hypothesis was that, if adults cannot full engage in the child's world, certainly other children – particularly peers – can. Is it possible to train peers in interview technique sufficiently well to allow them to carry out the interview as peer-to-peer events? If so, will this lead to more 'honest' and 'genuine' answers from the child respondents?

Conclusion

Accepting that there are, specific ethical problems is easy – planning a solution not so easy. To improve the validity of responses from children, a method of training pupil researchers was therefore planned, developed and trialled, to compare responses from adult interviewers with those from pupil interviewers and, in so doing, be able to judge the accuracy of the pupil responses. This will be reported on in a future paper.

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