

# **Working with Young Children as Co-Researchers: an approach informed by the UNCRC**

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# The UNCRC and the Early Years

- The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has suggested a working definition of “early years” which extends to all children under the age of eight (UN, 2005: para. 4).
- Children of this age, like older children, have the right to express their views freely and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, a right established in Article 12 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007).
- This right extends “to all matters affecting the child” and thus necessarily applies in the context of research projects relating to children, a position underscored by the Committee in its assertion that the right to express views should be ‘anchored in the child’s daily life ... including through *research and consultation*’ (UN 2009, at para 14).

# Research with young children

- There has been an increasing trend towards involving children in research not just as *research participants* but also as *peer* or *co-researchers*.
- The direct engagement of children in the design and delivery of research projects is arguably a necessary and logical consequence of adopting a children's rights-based approach to research (Alderson, 2008; Lundy and McEvoy, 2009).
- Nonetheless, this move towards the direct engagement of children in research processes - not just as subjects - has undoubtedly been skewed towards the involvement of older children. Instances where children under the age of eight are involved directly in research design, interpretation and dissemination remain rare.

# Engaging young children as co-researchers: an example

- The research team was commissioned by Barnardo's to undertake a research project as part of their 'Ready to Learn' Programme.
- The overall purpose of the research was to engage directly with Year One primary school children (aged 4-5 years old) to inform the development of an out-of-school hours programme for young children living in disadvantaged communities.
- Both Barnardo's and the research team were committed to working in a manner consistent with international children's rights standards, applying a rights based approach to the project.
- The team worked with two Children's Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs), one in each of two research schools and composed of four children (two boys and two girls) aged 4-5.

# Building children's capacity for engagement with the issues

- A key obstacle is the assumption that young children in particular lack the capacity or maturity to express their views or lack the ability to participate in the research process in a meaningful way.
- The Committee has stated that “it is not necessary that the child has complete knowledge of all aspects of the matter affecting her or him, but that she or he has sufficient understanding to be capable of appropriately forming her or his own views on the matter” (UN 2009, at para 21).
- Article 12 must therefore also be read in light of Article 13, that is, the right of all children to seek, receive and impart information. Indeed, the *‘right to information is essential, because it is the precondition of the child’s clarified decisions’* (UN, 2009, at para 25).
- Initial meetings with the CRAGs included a series of capacity building activities designed to familiarise the children with the issues surrounding the project, to develop their views on the issues and to assist them in applying their ideas to situations beyond their own experiences (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009).

# Building children's capacity for engagement with the issues

- For example, the CRAGs were asked to think about what children might like or find difficult about Year One.
- Image cards of a range of activities and aspects of school life were produced. The CRAG were asked to decide whether each image should be placed in an 'all children would like' pile, an 'all children would find hard' pile, or a '*some* children might like and *some* children might find hard' pile. Each 'pile' was represented by a hoop with the 'some children might like and some children might find hard' represented in the space between the hoops.
- One of the things the children had difficulty with initially was seeing beyond their own views and experiences. They were encouraged to think beyond this through further questions and prompts.
- These capacity building activities enabled the children to gain a wider perspective not only on the major issues in the project but also in relation to their role in helping the research team ascertain the views of different children other than themselves.

# Stages of involvement

A rights-based approach means that children must be involved in all stages of the research. This means engaging children in:

- Choice of research questions
- Choice of methods
- Interpretation of data
- Dissemination

# Engagement in the choice of research questions

- The two main research questions were: “What do Year Ones find hard at school?” and “How could an after-school service help them with these things they find hard?”
- While these questions were commissioned by Barnardo’s and thus bound the project team, adults and children alike, there was obviously scope for the research team to develop the sub-questions which would be used to answer these.
- For example, the CRAG’s most common suggestions about what children would find hard at school were used to develop a picture survey for the Year Ones.
- Since the images used for this activity were selected in light of discussion with the CRAGs, their perspectives on the issues which might be most important were incorporated in the subsequent picture survey, giving the CRAG a direct input into choosing main items in the research instrument.

# Engagement in the choice of methods

- The adult researchers had planned to adopt a variation of the ‘mosaic approach’ to form a ‘living picture’ of children’s lives in the context of readiness to learn by using a combination of picture prompts, photography, school tours and verbal forms of expression (Clark and Moss 2001).
- The methods we intended to use were explained to the children and they were asked if they had any suggestions on these or other ways in which we could encourage their class-mates to share their views and experiences.
- The first CRAG suggested that “circle time” would be a good way of finding out other children’s views.
- This allowed every child who wanted to say something to speak – for as long as they liked without interruption from others- and it allowed every child who did not want to say something the chance to pass the toy on without feeling uncomfortable, thus counteracting some of the recognised disadvantages of group interviews (Greig, Taylor and Mackay, 2007).

# Engagement in the choice of methods

- The use of cameras, is used widely as a tool through which children, especially young children, can express their views (Clark, 2004; Punch 2002; O'Kane, 2000; Cook and Hess 2003).
- The CRAGs were enthusiastic at this idea and felt that this would be a good way of helping their classmates tell us what they liked or found hard.
- However, an issue arose in relation to who got to use the cameras.
- Following up in the CRAG's concerns about some children (including themselves) feeling left out, we were able to adapt the activity to ensure that everyone got to join in but the participants' data was able to be distinguished for analysis.
- Christensen and James (2000) have suggested that researchers need to adopt practices which are not different from adult methods per se but which resonate with children's own concerns and routines. The best way of ascertaining what the latter are is undoubtedly to ask children themselves.

# Engagement in the interpretation of the data

- The research team discussed with the CRAG the results of the picture survey and camera activities.
- For example , the team demonstrated the findings of the picture survey to the children by using individual pictures of boys and girls corresponding to the actual number of male and female respondents to specific questions to highlight how many children liked or disliked each activity or aspect of school life according to gender.
- None of the children would have been able to comprehend the number or gender differences if the information had been presented in written tables. The data had to be presented visually.

# Presenting data in visual formats



# Children explaining why the bin was in the “like category”



# Engaging children in writing up and dissemination

- The main output for the project, a written report requested by Barnardo's as part of the original commission, was clearly the responsibility of the adult researchers.
- However, in line with the rights-based approach adopted throughout the research, we discussed ways in which the CRAG could contribute directly in this report.
- Given that most children in Year One are not able to write and that some may not be comfortable or able to express their views through drawing the research team, in consultation with the CRAG, employed the services of a professional artist to enable all of the children to express their final recommendations.
- The focus of this activity was therefore on what an 'ideal' out of school hours programme would look like.

**Children explaining the type of person they wanted to supervise an after-school service: a 'dancing granny'**



# Conclusions: ensuring “due weight”

- The major challenge of any rights-based approach is ensuring that children’s views are taken seriously.
- Accentuated when this is taking place in the context of adult-driven research processes and when the children involved are very young.
- Young children’s level of engagement is impacted by their limited literacy and numeracy skills as well as the fact that they may find it difficult to think beyond their own immediate experience.
- The onus is on adult researchers to facilitate expression, listen respectfully and acknowledge the view expressed in line with the first part of the obligation in Article 12 of the UNCRC but to give those views ‘due’ weight in line with the second.

# Conclusions: knowing the limits

- It is not in any child's best interests to have a suggestion accepted if the effect of that is to undermine the validity or reliability of the data and thus jeopardise the credibility of the research.
- A rights-based approach requires the researcher to listen to the child's views with respect always, but to give them due weight arguably only when the outcome of that will ultimately improve "the quality of solutions" (UN, 2009, para. 27).
- The key to involving children as co-researchers in a way that is rights-respecting is ultimately dependent on how the children are perceived and treated by the adult researchers.
- In instances where it is not possible, feasible or sensible to follow up on children's suggestions on an aspect of research questions, method or interpretation, then the reasons for this should be explained to the children in a way which they can understand.

## Conclusions: the benefits of a rights-based approach

- If young children's views are incorporated into the decisions which are made throughout the research process, much will be gained in the quest for high quality, relevant data on children's lives.
- Working with young children as co-researchers in a way which is respectful of their rights, is “not a momentary act but an intense exchange between children and adults” (UN, 2009, para 13).
- This exchange works two ways: increasing the opportunities for both children and adults to increase their skills and knowledge (Alderson, 2008).

**Thank You for listening!**