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Theme: Researching With Children and Youth

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Exploring the New Paradigm for Researching With Children and Youth

Understanding children's experience is increasingly a key purpose of much educational research. In contrast to traditional approaches to the study of children that emphasized the socialization of children through various stages of development, researchers within the social constructionism perspective begin with an insistence that childhood is a social construction that varies with time and place (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). They study children as social actors, as beings in their own right rather than as pre-adult becomings. Children are seen as active beings whose agency is important in the creation of their own life worlds. Although such research draws on adult perspectives to discern how children's lives are shaped by forces beyond their own control, it recognizes the importance of learning children's ways of proceeding and ways of making sense of their experience.

General Considerations

The new paradigm for studying childhood calls on researchers to be aware of and to respect children's perspectives, including their perspectives on the methods used by adults to obtain their views (Hill, 2006). Reading across the articles in this theme issue, we see researchers' efforts to conduct research in ways that respect children's agency and that respond to children's perspectives on research activities. We also see how researchers can benefit from children's ideas about the best ways to explore or represent their worlds and their experiences.

Conducting research with children and youth requires considerable sensitivity to proceed in ways that respect their competence while acknowledging their different life experience, knowledge, and prior experiences of interacting with adults. Important responsibilities for researchers include protecting the comfort and privacy of children and youth and ensuring that they do not convey any sense of the children and their views being evaluated or judged by

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the researcher. Further, participation in research should not be boring; researchers should try to provide involvement that is engaging and enriching for young people (Hill, 2006).

Children and young people take a variety of stances toward participation in research. For example, they may be engaged, open, self-protective, detached, or subversive (Hill, 2006). Such variability can be seen in the responses of children and young people in the research projects discussed in this issue. Young people prefer research that gives them genuine opportunities and choices for expressing their views. In anticipating or responding to such preferences, researchers maximize opportunities for participants to choose the forms of communication and the level of involvement that are welcomed.

Special Considerations in Schools as Research Sites

The researchers whose work we feature in this issue are all educators whose research with children and youth is situated in schools. Working with children and youth as research participants and/or co-researchers in the context and location of schools compounds the challenges of conducting research in a manner that recognizes and engages their rights, agency, and status as competent social actors. Other adults such as parents and teachers may hold traditional views of children regarding their competence and agency. Teachers and researchers may hold conflicting expectations for how researchers can or should communicate with children. Children themselves may be inclined to position researchers in roles typically enacted by other adults in schools and research activities in modes of typical school performance.

The issue of informed consent and children's agency can be problematic in school-based research with children and youth. Researchers might ask themselves, for example, how much free consent is possible in a coercive school system. Even in the least coercive school system, gaining consent for young people to participate in research involves layers of gatekeepers, and how research is presented to students can pressure them to participate (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001). Teachers, for example, may encourage their students to participate in order to present themselves and their school in a positive light.

Approaching children and youth through schools tends to define research as part of schooling (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001). For example, in inviting young people to participate in research, researchers may unwittingly cast themselves in the teacher role by presenting information about the research standing in the front of the classroom and using a teaching stance to command the students' attention. Beginning a research project from this "teacher" stance—as an adult who knows the answers to the questions he or she asks—may jeopardize the researcher's role as an adult who asks questions to which he or she genuinely does not have the answers.

The ideology of the school as reflected in roles of teachers and of students can limit or enhance children's opportunities to participate in and engage in research in ways that are congruent with and reflective of their experiences, preferences, and perspectives. The idea of students' willingness and ability to engage in learning activities including those involved in research activities is related to the concept of student engagement that Vibert and Shields (2003) discuss in terms of rational/technical, interpretative/student-centered, and

critical perspectives. In schools with a rational/technical perspective on student engagement, where teachers focus on "doing for, rather than doing with" children, teachers are expected to develop and direct learning activities that will engage students' interest and involvement. In contrast, in schools holding an interpretive/student-centered perspective or a critical perspective of engagement, teachers offer students choices in learning activities and endeavor to ensure that learning activities are more closely related to children's life experiences and their individual or communal interests.

Reciprocity is an important feature of ethical and moral approaches to research. Researchers need to try to ensure that the research will benefit children and that it will not place any extra burdens or worries on them. Respect for students' out-of-school time is a critical requirement. It is also important for researchers to be clear to children about the limitations to their participation and the effects it will have because children often are outcomes-oriented, expecting that something will come of their research participation in the shorter, rather than the longer, term. Fairness is also an important concern of young people, as is ensuring the widest possible involvement rather than selecting just a few participants (Hill, 2006). Researching with children and youth in the site of a school entails consideration of all students there, not only the invited participants.

How researchers engage with children and youth in schools to learn their perspectives and understandings of their experience can vary greatly in accordance with diverse opportunities and constraints. Considerations such as those discussed above form the backdrop of criteria for researchers working in the new paradigm for researching with children and youth. In this theme issue, researchers from the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta share stories about researching with children and youth. The resulting collection of work is intended to deepen appreciation for the project and possibilities of research with children and youth.

Overview of the Articles

In the opening article, "Researching Children's Experience Hermeneutically and Holistically," Julia Ellis situates the theme of the issue in qualitative research methods. Ellis frames her discussion of methods with three key ideas from hermeneutics: interpretation as a creative activity; the importance of part-whole, micro-macro relationships; and the key role of language and history. She emphasizes the use of pre-interview activities to get to know the child and to enable the child to teach the researcher about the context of interest. She explains how narrative approaches to interviewing enable the researcher to gain an holistic understanding of the child in order to appreciate and understand what the child has to say about the topic of interest to the researcher.

In the second article, Anna Kirova elaborates methodological and ethical issues for working in the new paradigm for researching with children and youth. To illustrate and clarify such issues, she discusses her work with game-playing to research childhood experiences of loneliness. In revisiting this methodology from her doctoral study, she highlights how using the board game enabled shared meaning, comfortable rapport, and negotiated power relationships with children as research participants. Her discussion also clarifies and

emphasizes the importance of using children's natural language, of avoiding imposing adult views, and of creating space for children to offer their views.

In the third article, "Using Think Alouds, Think Afters, and Think Togethers to Research Students' Inquiry Experiences," Jennifer Branch analyzes the use of oral protocol methods to explore the thinking of adolescents involved in inquiry-based instructional activities. She adds to methods designed for researching the experience of individuals—concurrent verbal protocols (Think Alouds) and retrospective verbal protocols (Think Afters)—a method designed for researching the experience of individuals working in small groups that she terms Think Togethers. Through these methods, Branch created comfortable, nonevaluative contexts for students to share their experiences and perspectives.

In the fourth article, Michael J. Emme, Anna Kirova, Oliver Kamau, and Susan Kosanovich present their experiences of ensemble research through four voices and four viewpoints. Fotonovela provided a method through which immigrant children could explore peer relationships including nonverbal peer communication. The authors suggest that image-based work such as fotonovela gives children the tools to be self-researchers, but also acknowledge the complexities that such methods involve including issues related to the ownership of and ethical use of images. Their discussion highlights the complexity and importance of multiple contributions of diverse research team members in the service of supporting the students' research with fotonovela.

Finally, in the closing article, Jill McClay explores how collaborative research—teachers and students working together with the researcher—enables investigation of young people's changing literacy development in fluid and rapidly evolving multiliteracies instructional projects. She clarifies how a researcher can work well with teachers and students in such collaborative ventures. She acknowledges the complexities of such research and the critical part that relationships of trust between teachers and researchers play in making possible research with young people in school settings.

Taken together, the articles in this theme issue present diverse research processes developed in response to particular kinds of research questions, with sensitivity to school contexts and with a commitment to respect, and appropriately invite the participation of children and youth. All the research activities and designs discussed in these articles represent efforts to: preserve the comfort of participating children and youth; recognize their agency and competence; protect their rights and autonomy; reduce the power difference between adult researchers and children; and create opportunities for developing shared meaning. In this way, this theme issue joins the larger conversation about the new paradigm for researching with children and youth.

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