

CHRISTINE CHAILLÉ

How To Know What Kids Already Know

Doing Research With Young Children

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Have you ever wondered about how children grow? How children think? Learn? See? Feel? Or how children will change from one age to the next? Research with young children is *intended* to help us learn about their abilities and development. Conducting research, however, can be a complicated process, fraught with (mis)understandings and (mis)interpretations. Relationships between researchers and their research participants (aka subjects) take many forms, varying from the traditional, in which researchers position themselves as expert inquirers into the experiences of others, to research relationships, in which the researcher and participants are seen as collaborators in the research process, co-constructing understanding. Variations on these models are used across early child development research, even though questions have been asked about researchers' ability to truly understand the mind of the child or about the feasibility of true collaboration with children in the research process.

When the "researched" are children, several complicated issues arise. First, the notions about childhood that we bring from our own experiences as children can project particular understandings onto our interpretations of children's experiences (Jipson, 2000). For example, individuals who grew up in a rural community, where the entire family participated in "doing the chores" and the work day ended only when the barn and field work was com-

pleted, may possess the intuitive belief is that everyone should inherently understand the importance of "pitching in" and persisting at a task until it is completed. Do people develop the same understanding if they grow up in the cities and suburbs, where much paid work takes place in high-rise buildings far from the homes and where children may spend most of their days with other children in schools or child care? As researchers, does our own background determine whether we interpret a child's wandering from activity to activity, for example, as "developmentally appropriate," or as irresponsible, or as an "attention deficit"? And what about the young child who persists at a task for long periods of time—is he or she "focused," "obsessed," or the holder of good work habits?

A second issue that deserves consideration is the differing social constructions of childhood that researchers in various disciplines may hold, and the ways these constructions are reflected in their research (Cannella, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). And how might a discipline-related construction differ from one that comes from childhood experiences? Both seem to be talking about the researcher's perspective on children. In fact, one is based in experience (memories of one's own childhood), while the other is socially transmitted within academic disciplines and becomes part of an individual's acquired cultural capital. In child care stud-

ies or teacher research examining instructional strategies, for example, researchers tend to view children as objects of adult attention and care. Consequently, research sometimes takes the form of looking at the effect of teacher behaviors, the curriculum, and the environment on children, often failing to examine the interactive nature of such encounters. The child, in such research, is believed to be the "object" of adult attention/intention, the passive receptacle for educational transmission. In child development research, however, the focus is on children as developmentally maturing organisms. When researchers take this perspective, they are more likely to focus on identifying children's ways of thinking and acting at particular points in time (as evidenced by stage theories) and / or on examining linear assumptions of development as progressive and generalizable.

Both the educational and psychological perspectives described above impose limitations and expectations on children. Each also interprets power and privilege in particular ways, thus creating particular social contexts and possibilities. For instance, both perspectives may lead to assumptions about children being unequally able to participate in rational problem solving or adult discourse, and therefore may constrain researcher understanding of what children are actually able to do and of what meanings their activities have for them. In addition, in each case adult authority is being

imposed on the child—through research activities themselves, through the “analysis and interpretation” of research data, and through researcher choices made in representing children’s experience and understandings.

Thinking about these issues led to an intense conversation between the authors, one an early childhood educator and the other a developmental psychologist. We wondered what other developmental psychologists and early childhood researchers thought about these concerns, and so we sent the following question, via E-mail, to our colleagues at other universities: **“In doing research with young children, how can we be confident that our understandings represent their thoughts/behaviors/experience?”** We hoped this question would generate a thoughtful response about doing research with children—and it did. We’d like to share some of the responses with you to give you an idea of the variety of ways people are thinking about this issue.

Our first response is from a developmental psychologist who was concerned about the validity and ethics of research with children.

Well, my immediate reaction to your question is—Uuugggh! This is one of those fundamental questions about philosophy of science and personal views on unresolved issues that we often put on the back shelves of our minds, maybe with issues involving nature-nurture, afterlife, and evolution. It strikes at the heart of one’s belief in the validity of the data we gather from children. For people who were raised in an era of empirical inquiry that lauded rather than scrutinized scientific methods, it sounds like a postmodern challenge to the traditional beliefs. That may polarize folks into two camps: those who want to defend empirical methods with children and those who want to show the limitations and liabilities of those methods.

Personally, I try to see merits in both positions, but I retreat from the poles to

some middle ground, perhaps mushy, perhaps dialectically unresolved, that says yes, researchers can study and collect information from young children (and infants) that can represent their thoughts, behaviors, and experience in reasonable ways. However, our confidence should be tempered with skepticism so that we look for weaknesses in the methods we use and the interpretations that we render about young children. Certainly, we are trained to be critical of the work of other researchers—we need to exercise the same balance of confidence and skepticism with our own work.

To explain how he deals with these issues, this respondent continued:

Your question asks how can we be confident and not how confident are we, so I should say that we can increase our confidence in several traditional ways. First, use multiple methods to gather data. Second, look for converging evidence with your results and other research. Third, look for disconfirming evidence about the data and interpretations. Fourth, try to replicate or disconfirm your own work. Fifth, gauge reactions from peers to see if the data and claims make sense to others. This may be more politically and historically situated, but seems to be as important as replication at times. None of these steps alone is adequate, but together they can increase the confidence one has in the representations offered about young children.

A different reaction is that the question does not really get at “children’s voices.” The validity of the researchers’ representation seems a different angle than how the data include and reflect the “voices” of children. The stock answer then is to include qualitative data, usually excerpts and transcripts (maybe even actual voices and video) of children to convey vignettes of what they actually said. Of course, these are elicited reactions and selected samples, so the issue of validity or representation comes up again but the steps outlined above may apply as safeguards. This

sequence of suggestions sounds like the current views of using both quantitative and qualitative data to reinforce the interpretations and represent the range of children’s reactions. That is an advance over previous decades, but the real hard-core postmodernists would probably snivel at such compromises and point out that the foundation is still cracked, even if the house looks fancy from the outside. They might argue about the political correctness of such compromises and the hegemony of the empiricists who throw in a few quotes from kids. They would also whine about the lack of respect they get and the idiosyncrasies of human experience that make all generalizations fallible. Yadda, yadda, yadda, à la Seinfeld, is the reply of the other camp. (See how the middle ground invites schizophrenia?)

Other respondents expressed the need to inquire into the social and cultural contexts in which people develop in order to understand how knowledge is constructed. A professor of early childhood education involved in cross-cultural research offered the following comments:

About your question: There are two important aspects to my approach to researching children and their perspectives. First, I look to understand the social ecology of children’s lives, with the goal of understanding how they construct or otherwise arrive at knowledge, insight, and understanding. Second, I look to establish a relationship in which some degree of trust develops—mutually. I find it necessary for children to know me, in some ways, if I want to know them in more than superficial ways. It requires risk taking, of sorts—and the sharing of vulnerability. What I ask, how I ask it, and later representations are all informed by a relationship that is . . . humane and caring—at least I hope so.

An early childhood researcher from Taiwan similarly commented:

I feel your topic is very critical in research

with young children. While exploring my son's play, I often wonder if I really catch the themes . . . from his point of view. To try to understand his thoughts/behaviors/experience during play, I usually need to refer to his daily life experience rather than only observe play behavior itself. I feel his play themes seem to be embedded in his life themes. We live together, play together, and interact with each other intimately all day long. [Being involved] in his life lets me be able to check repeatedly his play themes according to what he is acting, talking, laughing, eating, doing, and so on.

These early childhood educators raise the issue of the researchers' relationships with the children who are subjects of their research, and the importance of continued interaction. In contrast, in psychological research the "rapport building" with children often consists of brief visits to their child care centers. This short interaction makes them comfortable enough to cooperate, but is it really a relationship? It often doesn't help researchers interpret what they've seen . . . but then again, can you ever really know children with whom you have no ongoing relationship?

One of the developmental psychologist respondents recognized this issue and went on to speak about how extended relationships with his own children helped him to interpret developmental theory and better understand his research.

I've stared at your question a few times, intending to respond, but I have to admit I'm at a loss. I've never really considered the question of how we can be "confident that our understandings represent their thoughts/behaviors/experience." Maybe that's the point you were trying to make? I guess if I had to answer, I would say that it comes mostly from my own observations of my kids. Before I had kids I was not as good a developmental psychologist as I am now, because I didn't have a good stock of common-sense experience to com-

pare abstract theoretical and experimental stuff to. Parents do a pretty good job figuring out the thoughts/behaviors/experiences of their own kids. If a finding corresponds to my experience as a parent, I tend to give it the benefit of the doubt. If not, I tend to be skeptical. I understand that my experience may or may not be representative, but I'm not sure there's a better way to go.

However, this same respondent goes on to acknowledge the limitations, from his perspective, of what he calls "the insight approach":

But, on a completely serious note, I agree that the "I've got kids so I can have insight" approach is pretty flawed and doesn't seem much like a claim to knowledge in the scientific sense. But it strikes me as the same problem that a cross-cultural psychologist or anthropologist has—as an outsider it is difficult to know how to interpret stuff from within the framework of the subjects. The problem is compounded because most adults think they remember what it was like to be a kid. Especially in educational research, a researcher's recollections of their own childhood are often the knowledge base that is tapped first.

We wondered if it is possible to create experiences that can provide opportunities for insight, while still giving children the best possible chance to show what they know. While parents may be able to gain these insights across time with their children, researchers often must create settings that allow them to gain the same insights more quickly.

After considering the comments made by our colleagues, several issues were underscored for us. First, one of the difficulties we see in research with young children is the assumption that researchers can actually capture a child's reality at any given moment in time. This problem leads to other assumptions, such as that researchers can predict a child's thinking at other moments in time. The deeper problem, however, seems

to be whether capturing a moment in time is capturing the child's reality or whether it is the researcher's representation of the child's reality, given the researcher's own life experiences and theoretical perspectives.

In light of these concerns, we wonder how we can more directly engage children in our process of meaning-making and knowledge-production. This can be especially challenging, as the researcher's inherent positional power and status can readily overwhelm and subvert children's understanding of their own experience and agency.

Although we don't have an answer to this question, we recognize that it is important to identify how children's understanding and subjectivity are shaped through their interactions with us, as well as how these interactions shape our understandings of children.

We end by returning to the response offered by our first developmental psychologist, who said,

If we can step way back from the camps and look at the battleground in a broader landscape, we might see how small it is and ask more basic questions about the nature of the research, not about the accuracy or validity, but about the worth of it. Does it matter to children or improve their position? Does participation in research do more than advance personal agendas of researchers; does it help improve the lives and future of children, the participants directly and others more generally? That may be the voice that goes unspoken and unasked for in research from either camp.

References

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