



## Conducting Research with Children in Outside School Hours Care

BRUCE HURST – *University of Melbourne*

If somebody asked you to think about doing research with children, what would be the first thing that popped into your mind? I imagine that most of us would think about adult researchers with university degrees, conducting surveys, interviews or experiments with children as the research subjects. It's a reasonable conclusion, given that in western cultures children are almost always the objects of research and almost never the researcher (Cannella, 2008). This article invites you to question whether research is 'adult's business' or children's business too.

### Educators are researchers too

Research is also part of the work of early childhood and OSHC educators. Every time you reflect on your pedagogy, or search for new ideas, you are engaging in research. However, what role do children have in your practitioner-research? Are they merely sources of data or do they have a deeper involvement?

There is a growing body of research that questions the traditional roles of 'adult as researcher' and 'child as research subject'. Most educators would acknowledge that children possess many of the qualities of a

good researcher. Children are often intelligent, inquisitive, methodical and insightful, so why can't they be researchers too?

### Why research WITH rather than ON children?

There are significant reasons why you should share your research tasks with the children you support. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, suggests that all children who attend your service have a right to express their views about your educational practice freely (Lundy, 2007). However, I wonder when many educators engage in reflection and planning, just how free children are to contribute their ideas. As adults, do we apply boundaries to how children can contribute? Are their contributions limited to scheduled group meetings or suggestion boxes? Do we rely heavily on observation and our theoretical knowledge, and ignore the voices of children? Do we have practices that make it easier for some children to contribute, but silence others? Do we have planning practices that are convenient for us but less so for children?

*It is also worth considering the depth of children's contributions to your research and planning. Do you use children merely as a source of ideas and feedback, or are they able to engage in planning decisions and reflection more meaningfully? Involving children more deeply in decision-making is about respect for children's knowledge. I'm sure many of us have been in situations before where we have contributed an idea or a thought but were then ignored in the decision-making process. Being ignored in this way can make you feel powerless and inconsequential.*

Involving children in decision-making processes is also a valuable learning experience. Children can gain understanding in how planning occurs and learn how to negotiate with others. They may also feel valued and experience a greater sense of belonging to the service.

## Researching with children

Three years ago, I undertook a research project into the lives of older children in OSHC, and decided to ask the child participants to be co-researchers instead of subjects (Hurst, 2013). The nine children in the project collaborated with me to design the method and were responsible for data collection and taking photographs that informed the interviews.

As an adult, sharing power with children was discomfiting. I was used to being 'in charge' but instead had to surrender power to my co-researchers. I had my own adult ideas of how the research should be conducted and what the children should photograph. Instead, I had to honour the children's suggestions and negotiate with them as I would with an adult colleague. Often the things the children suggested were inconvenient. One participant sometimes prioritised play ahead of the project. Others wanted extra steps included in the method that required additional work. One participant rushed through their photographs in an hour whilst others took weeks. Although challenging at times, collaborating with the children in this way produced better research for the participants and me. All of the participants felt ownership of the project and showed great commitment. I ended up with data that more closely reflected the experiences of the participants than would otherwise have been the case.



## Emily's story

Engaging children more deeply in your research provides you with different perspectives on your practice. An example from my project is Emily's story. Emily told me about being required to participate in a Zumba session at her OSHC. Rather than participate, Emily led a group of children in staging a sit-in, where they protested against doing Zumba. Emily explained that they protested until the educators produced different activities that the children preferred.

When Emily told me the story, I instinctively responded like an adult. I applied developmental theory to the story. Isn't this what we expect of a 10 year old? Don't we expect her to be rebellious and to act like she has outgrown OSHC? Perhaps she is trying to impress her peers? Peers become very important at that age. Maybe she is self-conscious? I drew on socio-cultural theory. Maybe she has family members who dislike dancing? I used attachment theory and neuroscience. Maybe she experienced trauma as a young child and has difficulty participating in activities with others? Maybe she had a bad experience with Zumba?

However, what I needed was another perspective to understand Emily's behaviour. I needed Emily's perspective. She explained to me that she was the only child in her class who attended OSHC. The other children thought OSHC was babyish and sometimes teased her for attending. Emily was worried that she would be teased and also teased more for doing Zumba. The answer simple, but we would never find it without seeking Emily's perspective.

Emily's story is an example of how, by consulting more deeply with children, we can understand their perspectives and produce services that better meet their needs. I doubt if a group meeting about 'what we like to do' or a vote on 'who wants to do Zumba' would have yielded insight into Emily's problems with Zumba. Were there other ways that the educator could have consulted with children? The information that Emily shared would have applications beyond deciding on sports activities. It spoke volumes of how older children in the school perceived the OSHC service and perhaps why so few older children attend. Imagine the potential Emily's insights have for improving her OSHC.

## Conclusion

The Framework for School Age Care (FSAC) invites educators to see themselves as practitioner-researchers and I suspect most educators engage in research every day. But research shouldn't just be an adult's job. Children have a right to be involved meaningfully in decision-making about things that affect them, including educational practice in OSHC and other early childhood services. They also have insights and perspectives to share that differ from our adult perspectives. As educators, if we can find meaningful ways to share children's thoughts and opinions about our programs, then our jobs can become a lot easier and we become better educators. ◀

## REFERENCES

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