Using participatory methods with young children; reflections on emergent 'ethically important moments' in school-based research

Tríona Stokes

REVIEW

Using participatory methods with young children; reflections on emergent 'ethically important moments' in school-based research

Tríona Stokes*

School of Education Building, Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

To engage young children meaningfully in educational research requires careful scrutiny of ethics and of methodological choices [Vandenbroeck, M. and B. de-Bouverne. 2006. "Children's Agency and Educational Norms: A Tensed Negotiation." *Childhood* (13): 127–143; Dockett, S., J. Einarsdottir, and B. Perry. 2009. "Researching with Children: Ethical Tensions." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* (7): 283–298; Clark, A., and P. Moss. 2011. *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. 2nd ed. London: National Children's Bureau]. The increased involvement required of children in participatory research heightens ethical and methodological concerns [Lundy, L., L. McEvoy, and B. Byrne. 2011. "Working with Young Children as Co-researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child." *Early Education and Development* 22 (5): 714–736]. Rather than focusing on ethical considerations identified prior to the research through standard institutional vetting practices, the gaze of this article lies on ethics-in-action, or ethical considerations emerging throughout research processes. Thus, a focus on ethical encounters throughout the course of school-based fieldwork is framed by the examination of three emerging 'ethically important moments' [Guillemin, M. and L. Gillam. 2004. "Ethics, Reflexivity and Ethically Important Moments in Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10: 261–280]. Themes of representation and researcher relationships are explored as part of this discussion. Mindful of its primary stakeholders, the participant children, the merits for viewing research conducted within the institution of school as an unfolding process of this research, are outlined. The paper concludes that in the interests of both rigour and effect, methodological reflexivity be brought to bear on the varying and complex ethical encounters educational research constitutes.

Keywords: ethics; participatory research; school-based; assent

Introduction

In this article, a reflexive focus is established based on the identification of three 'ethically important moments' which emerged through fieldwork with young children in the Irish primary school context (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). The particular ethical encounters identified refer to power imbalances within research relationships and representations of the child. These represent two of the fundamental ethical concerns listed by Phelan and Kinsella (2013). The exercise resonates with Connolly's

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*Corresponding author. Email: triona.stokes@mu.ie

(2003) view of research ethics as inclusive of researcher conduct, in terms of both personal behaviour and the treatment of others throughout research processes. Further, it responds to a call to develop ethical practices through dialogue, both between the researcher and participant children, and the researcher and the research community as a collaborative sharing of learning (Christensen and Prout 2002, 477). Prior to the discussion of the 'ethically important moments' presented thematically, an introductory section serves as a necessary preamble to the particularities of school-based participatory research with children regarding ethical and methodological considerations.

Introducing methodological and ethical considerations in research with children

In recent decades, there has been a sea change in the fields of sociology and education to embrace research 'with', as opposed to 'on', children. The focus has increased on building research relationships with children by seeking a perspective of 'ethical symmetry' in relation to adults and children engaged together in research (Christensen and Prout 2002). Thus, there has been a discernible shift away from the traditionalist view of children 'as objects of research', towards actively engaging young children 'as subjects of research' (Greene and Hill 2005, 1). Informed by the UN Convention on the rights of the Child, or the UNCRC (1989), one manifestation of this shift is the emergence of publications using children's rights-based research methods (Hart 1992; Alderson 2000; Shier 2001; Lundy and McEvoy 2012).

As an active and meaningful contributor to his or her own life trajectory, in accordance with the UNCRC (1989), the child is recognised as having particular abilities and means of describing his or her own world (Thomas and O' Kane 1998). The UNCRC (1989) also stipulates honouring children's right to access and participate in research pertaining to their lives and interests. Moreover, as rights-holders, children are entitled, rather than merely able, to engage in research, placing a concomitant duty on adults to facilitate such engagement (Lundy and McEvoy 2012). Therefore, differing means of communication and meaning-making must be offered children participants in research, to honour and make explicit their contributions. It also renders the methodological choices presented to children an ethical consideration, as the means offered children can effectively facilitate or deny their engagement in the research aspect.

Ethical processes must be addressed in undertaking any research, none more so than working with young children, who are considered vulnerable as a research population (Papademas 2009; BERA 2011). Much has been offered in terms of ethical guidelines for working with young children in educational research (Alderson 1995; Clark and Moss 2011; Christensen and Prout 2002; Greene and Hill, 2005). In the area of Children's Geographies, writers such as Bushin (2007) has promoted flexibility in interviewing young children, based on ethical complexities encountered when interviewing children in their own homes, from gaining access, to parental presence. Ponto (2015) has discussed ethical issues arising during mobile interviews conducted with children, such as interpreting signals as to how and when to conclude the interview, in the absence of the support of a 'sedentary' interview structure.

Sikes (2006, 106) asserts that ethics impacts upon the selection of research topics and methodologies. Consequently, teacher researchers undertaking interpretative or qualitative research often discover that methodological and ethical issues are

'inextricably interwoven' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrisson 2011, 89). Moreover, it has been claimed that effective methodology and ethics go 'hand-in-hand' (Thomas and O' Kane 1998). This implies that the simultaneous consideration of ethics and methods are imperative to the success of any research endeavour with children. Therefore, it behoves the educational researcher to provide the best possible methodological match to serve young children's differing communication modes and means, which can be facilitated by the use of participatory research methods.

Introducing participatory research methods in educational research

The research methods selected for the purposes of any educational research endeavour ought to be chosen in accordance with the research question posed, its social and cultural contexts, and with those participating in the study (Christensen and James 2008). Thus, research in the social sciences increasingly includes differing means by which young children can be supported to actively and meaningfully contribute to educational research (Danby and Farrell 2004; White et al. 2010).

The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss 2011) provides multiple distinct modes through which young children can be facilitated to respond to a research question. Photography, drawing, cataloguing, and sorting and classifying information, are a sample of varied means by which children can respond. This can benefit the child by offering a mosaic, or a multitude of modes of expression through which to respond to the shared research question. The approach can also benefit the educational researcher by providing a broader, more textured 'picture' of the theme under investigation. Resulting 'higher definition' detailed thematic representation can give rise to opportunities for the further generation of data based on emergent patterns, or simply create a 'mosaic' of research materials constituting children's responses to the research question posed.

Institutional ethics and the process of ethics – an Irish study

The study pertaining to this article engaged 75 child participants aged 4–6 years and 17 child advisors forming a Children's Rights Advisory Group (CRAG). The research methods included the observation of play for six weekly sessions, child participant voting on CRAG-generated catalogues, which informed the membership of semi-structured small-group interview groups. 4–6 child advisors formed a CRAG in each school setting. CRAG members are not researching 'subjects', rather:

> … invited participants in the project in the capacity of co-researchers and as a key stakeholder group who could offer particular insight into the issues under consideration. (Lundy and McEvoy 2009, 48)

Children's Rights Advisory Groups (CRAGs) were invited to partake at critical intervals throughout the research process, consistent with Woodhead's (2009) description of children in the role as co-researchers. On acceptance of the invitation to join a CRAG, child advisors were introduced to the research topic through a series of capacity-building exercises which served to recall their institutional knowledge of school-based play from their previous school year. Critically, their role aligned with the stance of Lundy, McEvoy, and Byrne (2011) that a CRAG is to advise, rather

than to collect data. CRAG members were thus invited to give insight into themes emerging from the data, in addition to presenting cursory findings to the participant class group at the culmination of the fieldwork.

Due to the nature of the participation outlined, consent was sought from both CRAG members and child participants alike through tailored application forms consistent with standard postgraduate research institutional ethics procedures. The affiliated educational institution, Queen's University, Belfast, granted ethical approval for the associated doctoral study. Children were facilitated in actively renewing consent at the outset of each weekly research session, demonstrating commitment to the principle of ongoing consent or consent as process.

Institutional ethical procedures to secure initial consent or assent has been described as a process by which students:

> … package the open-ended contingencies of qualitative research in such a way that convinces your supervisor and any organisation that you are studying that no risk is involved. (Silverman 2010, 175)

Guillemin and Gillam (2004), however, distinguish 'procedural ethics' from 'the process of ethics' as ethical considerations not evident from the outset. The 'process of ethics' is, therefore, the focus of this paper, and more particularly, the exercise of identifying and expounding three emergent 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 264). This reflexive strategy is undertaken as part of a:

> … continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data, but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context. (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 274)

Efforts to engage in ongoing self-appraisal in terms of 'performance as researcher' throughout the study were informed by established institutionally-guided ethical standards, and supported by the substantial body of topical literature. A further reflexive practice emerged through systematically reviewing field notes and research sessions. Engagement in a process of review and researcher self-appraisal allowed for the clear identification of three 'ethically important moments' from practice by the researcher. An examination of each individual 'ethically important moment' allows for dialogic interchange with theory in critical reflection upon practice with regard to dignity in representation, followed by relationship, and then presentation.

1st Ethical consideration: dignity in representation

Representation of participants, how their voices and images are captured in the research process requires consideration of how each stakeholder is treated. Phelan and Kinsella (2013) advise that matters of privacy, safety and dignity must be borne in mind when examining the representation of children in educational research. Safety and privacy in terms of both anonymity, and data use and storage can be largely protected by established institutional ethical processes. 'Procedural ethics', as termed by Phelan and Kinsella (2013) can also establish transparent ethical protocols effectively through clear explication of the research and its purposes to all stakeholders, through the use of inclusive, child-centred language. Dignity, for example,

and how it can be upheld is less tangible, and therefore, potentially more challenging to safeguard. However, for any educational research endeavour with children to be congruent with the principles of the UNCRC (1989), the preservation of dignity is unequivocal. Consequently, children's involvement in research processes demands consideration of how their contributions are represented with dignity within the research and the dissemination of its findings.

One viable means of examining the dignity afforded children in research processes is in the handling and treatment of research artefacts, including their written contributions. In addition to the use of children's drawings for catalogue voting by child participants in the associated study, children were also invited to add further desired play-related items for their classroom. This gesture broadly demonstrated a willingness to 'being open to children's agendas' within the use of participatory research techniques (Thomas and O' Kane 1998, 341). One means of being open to children's agendas is by posing questions relevant to children's concerns and the use of participatory research techniques within 'activity days' (Thomas and O' Kane 1998). Activity days, which are structured around the research question and represent the space and time offered to children to articulate their viewpoints on a given topic. The affordance of such time and space offers children opportunities for further considering and articulating the research question, which belies a respectful and dignified manner, ultimately honouring their contributions in a practical way. The first 'ethically important moment' occurred during such an expanse of time and space within the research process. It was during the latter stages of small-group interviews and towards the culmination of the research process, and it is presented as a vignette, with researcher field notes serving as a prompt.

Ethically important moment 1

'A child for whom English is an additional language approached me directly on a research visit to her classroom subsequent to her inclusion at small-group semi-structured interview. On her approach, I was about to proceed to interview other children. She appeared concerned as she followed me closely around the classroom as I was arranging the interview groups for the day. Maria* struggled to articulate her concern, but gestured towards the adjoining classroom where the interviews were being convened. (*Maria is a pseudonym)

I explained that it would be the turn of other children to be interviewed that day, but this merely increased Maria's insistent gesturing towards the interview area in the adjoining room. This presented an 'ethically important moment' for me in the research process as it had been explained to all participants that they would be invited to interview on one occasion only over the course of the research period. Admittance of one child to the interview space a second time might appear to other children to contravene this decision, and hence be deemed inequitable. However, I felt the child's insistent plea had to be investigated and resolved.

I decided to ask the classroom teacher to delay the first scheduled small-group interview and guided Maria to the interview table where she immediately asked for her research catalogue. On opening it, she returned to the page where she had drawn her preferred additional catalogue item for play and indicated that she needed an eraser to change the ball she had originally drawn. She corrected the ball with a pencil, drawing a larger ball, more circular in shape with an added design

feature. Maria appeared satisfied with this change and smiled broadly, leaving the interview space after thanking me.

This 'ethically important moment' led to the realisation that a similar opportunity routinely afforded adults to review their research contribution, particularly with reference to interview manuscripts, had been absent in the structure of this study. Reviewing transcribed interviews is a recommended practice in educational research in order that corrections can be made as deemed necessary (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). Undertaken as a matter of course in much qualitative research with adult participants, this raises questions in terms of why children would not be also afforded the same privilege of reviewing, and potentially adjusting, their research contributions. Due to issues of access or capacity, such as varying reading levels, children could be offered assistance with re-reading or reviewing their written contributions. Thomas and O' Kane (1998, 345) describe a comparable process during research 'activity days' as effectively having given 'them [children] a chance to review and refine what they were telling us'. Affording all children the opportunity to review their written contributions would arguably have strengthened the validity of the related study. Moreover, according to Kefyalew (1996), as the extent to which children enjoy the freedom to actively partake in the research increases, so does its reliability.

Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller (2005, 248) regard flexibility in data collection as an important element of developing research relationships with children, as opposed to methodological 'sloppiness'. Therefore, the decision to facilitate the child in amending her contribution was justifiable as the demonstration of such flexibility as opposed to 'sloppy' research, or the absence of rigour. This reflects a positive outcome, where the research can arguably be considered more robust while honouring the child's ability to review his or her written contribution. Thus, in the interest of giving participant children this option, researchers can affirm children's contributions and bring closure to that aspect of the research cycle.

2nd Ethical consideration: research relationships between adults and children

By their nature, power relations are never neutral and adult educational researchers must always be mindful of this in engaging children in research. Qvortrup et al. (1994) originally challenged the 'naturalised' power relations of adult to child in research. An educational researcher within a school context further constitutes an authoritative adult, for whom displeasing may be perceived by children as resulting in sanction. Nonetheless, Holt (2004) maintains that the differences between children and adults in research need not be viewed as essential, considering that particular children and adults may have multiple commonalities and differences. Ultimately, the power imbalance, which cannot be negated, can be redressed to some extent through the design and management of research and its modes of enquiry, without necessarily 'othering' adult researchers from child researchers as polarities. For example, Lundy and McEvoy (2012) recognise the role of occasional adult support of the child in developing his or her evolving capacity in line with Article 5 of the UNCRC (1989).

The participatory approach adopted by the associated study required that a relationship of trust be built between stakeholders to forge a working relationship between researcher and child advisors and child participants. The establishment of a researcher relationship with the school principal was critical to facilitating open

engagement with, and critical reflection on, the data generated. Furthermore, the establishment of a relationship between the classroom teacher and researcher was considered critical both to authentic data interpretation and to increase the ease with which the nature of participatory methods, such as voting, might be executed effectively at a whole-class level. In terms of establishing child–adult research relations, according to Morrow and Richards (1996, 100).

> using methods which are non-invasive, non-confrontational and participatory, and which encourage children to interpret their own data, might be one step forward in diminishing the ethical problems of imbalanced power relationships between researcher and researched at the point of data collection and interpretation. (1996, 100)

Children were facilitated in interpreting their own data in the aligned study by discussing their play catalogue choices at interview. Further, as noted in relation to 'ethically impotent moment 1', flexibility in relation to data collection in classroom-based research is essential (Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller 2005). Thus, flexibility is essential as a researcher attribute with consideration for the pace of contemporary classroom life replete with the complexities of teaching schedules that accommodate pupil and programmatic needs.

Phelan and Kinsella (2013, 85) note that although a relationship which creates a false sense of 'friendship' may raise ethical issues, a relationship which reduces or minimises children's agency, is creating another 'fine line'. Therefore, modifications and adaptations to aspects of the study are justifiable, and expected to some extent. Thus, further to the weekly play observations scheduled over six weeks, children were invited in threes to attend at small-group semi-structured interviews using their completed catalogues both as a grouping device and as a supported entry point to the research focus of play. Concurrently, Children's Rights Advisory Group (CRAG) meetings were scheduled with the researcher to advise on the research process and on the emergent data. Meetings were organised on alternate days to the interviews in deference to standing arrangements of school scheduling determining CRAG members' availability. Therefore, due to the structure of the research methods and their execution, significantly fewer children were required to interact with the researcher in the school as the research process neared completion. It was at this juncture that the second ethical moment took place.

Ethically important moment 2

One day, as I walked across the school yard having completed the research input in the school, a group of children from the participant class lined up ready to return to class after break time greeted me when they saw me. One child called out, 'We miss you on Mondays', which prompted a chorus of children to repeat the statement. My emotional response resonated as 'an ethically important moment'. I realised that some of the children from the participant class group were missing, what they had come to regard as, what the research constituted, or the regular Monday input, which included an opportunity for any child to speak to me further to the play observation.

At this juncture, when they saw me in the school on Mondays, I was not freely available to each of them to discuss their play, but generally to a selected few scheduled for interview. The ethical consideration was the nature of the relationship which I had

cultivated with the children and the extent of it. So easily this class group had taken me into their confidence. So readily, they had extended friendship and trust, and that had been necessarily compromised to some extent by the progressive nature of the research cycle. I smiled uneasily at the children and proceeded across the yard, saying I would be calling in to see them again in the following weeks. At that moment I felt both touched and dismayed by the clear emotional connection the children had made with me through the research process. The incident left me questioning the finite nature of my role as a researcher and any unintended emotional impact on the participant children in the transition from the research project.

Researching with young children clearly demands the formation of a relationship between the researcher and participant children, but does not account for the management of expectations around that relationship once it changes or ends. The 'ethically important moment' raised the question of the individual child's agency within the research process, the framework and ideology of children's rights-based research notwithstanding. The relationship between the researcher and the children remains imbalanced, in favour of the adult. This imbalance has been described as one of the ongoing dilemmas of researching childhood (Lundy and McEvoy 2012). Methods described as 'fun' or 'novel' can assist with making children feel at ease with the adult researcher (Punch, 2002). The very nature of participatory methods leads to increased interaction between the child and researcher, which can assist in building a relationship, even over a short time period, evidently. It is arguably a reflection on the research quality, how the researcher explicates him or herself fairly from the relationship, ostensibly constructed for the sole purpose of generating research. It behoves the researcher to consider how he or she will take steps to honour the child's contribution through feedback on the research process and results, in an accessible manner. Where children are operating as co-researchers, this can be partly facilitated through class presentations on the research. This forms the basis of the third 'ethically important moment', which occurred during the data collection process in the study in question.

3rd Ethical consideration: presentations by children as part of the research process

CRAG members enthusiastically accepted the invitation to assist with the design and collation of pretend to play item catalogues upon which child participants subsequently voted. CRAG members were subsequently offered the opportunity to present on the results of the cataloguing to their peers having been invited to offer their insight and interpretation on emergent themes as part of data analysis. Child advisors were asked to give a summary of each of the top-voted play items to child participants and other school members in each school setting. While not constitutive of findings, the catalogue voting marked an integral part of the research process in preparing an overview or snapshot of the context. It also proved a tangible way for CRAG members to conceptualise the research question and share their arising insights. Moreover, the presentation was designed to affirm the children's research input by providing a platform to present to their peers and school leaders on their interpretation thereof. This aligns with Woodhead's (2009) interpretation of children as co-researchers which offers children a role in both the analysis and interpretation of research.

In order to prepare for the first presentation amongst the respective schools, where participants were as young as five years, a research session was dedicated to working with CRAG members to assist them in generating statements that summarised their

knowledge about the top-voted play items for those serving as an audience. The children eagerly volunteered to present information on a particular item using a Microsoft PowerPoint display with photographs and images as a prompt. Each CRAG member's recollection of the item on which they volunteered to present, and the information pertaining to it, was elicited through initial brainstorming, and specific questioning supported by group discussion. This process revealed a challenge to CRAG members in remembering the detail of their presentation inputs, outlined below.

Ethically important moment 3

When each child was satisfied with the agreed content of their presentation points, a rehearsal of the entire presentation was conducted. It became clear that in the time it took to return to the first presenter, children were struggling to recollect the detail of their presentation points. This presented an 'ethically important moment' as I observed a sense of performance pressure or anxiety building among CRAG members in relation to the impending presentation.

In a bid to reduce any feelings of discomfort, and what I perceived as performance anxiety amongst CRAG members, I made an immediate decision to take action to address the situation. To reduce the sense of pressure and to pre-empt any further pressure inadvertently being imposed on CRAG members, I promptly offered to record the presentation pieces during the rehearsal. When I asked if any CRAG member wished to have the presentation piece recorded as 'back up', to serve as a reminder during the live presentation, each child readily agreed. This appeared to confirm my sense of growing anxiety amongst CRAG members at the prospect of remembering their presentation piece. The recording process also facilitated the children in hearing back their own presentation pieces, which they thoroughly enjoyed.

The first live presentation went very smoothly and children appeared to present with ease to the audience, which included the school principal and their classroom teacher, in addition to their classmates and participant children. Furthermore, only one of seven CRAG members requested the use of the recorded version to be played in place of speaking to the group during the live presentation. For this child, this pre-recorded 'back up' was essential, in alleviating the burden of an imposed research-related performance anxiety. It is likely that the other six children benefitted from the support of the recording, on which they could rely.

In their subsequent review of the research process, several child advisors commented that their presentation of the research to an audience was their favourite aspect of the research process. It is unclear whether this sentiment would have been expressed without the inclusion of such presentation supports, which indicates that the support features offered may have alleviated any potential performance-related anxiety across the group. Performance anxiety, in this instance, might be considered an undesired 'side effect' as a consequence of the elevation from the status of a research participant to research presenter within the practice of enrolling children as co-researchers (Woodhead 2009). Herein lays the challenge of striking a balance between offering children engaging in co-research aspects authentic and potentially empowering opportunities for educational growth and development, while not over-burdening children with the demands immersion in research processes brings. It also serves as a reminder of the potential addition for further layers beyond the rudimentary research cycle and process, which may prove onerous for some children. It would

be important, therefore, to consider, and account for, any potential 'performative' aspects of researching with young children as part of the selection process at the outset of research.

Catering for the differing needs of learners requires the provision of additional supports tailored to the needs of all children (Heacox 2002). I believe that my experience as a former classroom teacher assisted in the recognition of the need for such support, and the instinctive form it took. It echoes Dalli and Te One's (2012) assertion that both creativity and sensitivity to the child's viewpoint are required for respectful research, in addition to a willingness to relinquish power as an adult. In terms of research, it also represents a tension between raising the stakes for child 'performativity' and as a means of offering 'voice' and the opportunity to articulate the research process from the position of the individual child. By virtue of being rights-holders, children are entitled to have their voices heard (Lundy 2007).

Mauthner (1997) argues that where space is created for them, children's voices express themselves clearly. How, and to what extent, 'voice' as a representation of a person, can be captured at all can be contested. However, for the purposes of this research, it was endeavoured to speak to the child rather than for him or her, and to hear the child speak and hold that safe (Spivak 1988). Notably, giving 'voice' to individuals collectively thus results in a chorus of different voices sounding, and may be more akin to a cacophony of pitch and tone, rather than a singular harmonious melody.

Conclusion

Working with young children in research can be challenging in terms of the methodological and ethical questions it raises. To truly engage young children as researchers demand careful consideration of its multiple facets, from researcher relationship to questions of representation of participant children. The 'ethically important moments' discussed reflect three ostensibly ordinary transactions, which provoked scrutiny and contemplation. While each moment discussed has been linked with a documented research concern, as a unit, they account for the experience of one educational researcher engaged in a singular school study. Thus, any research project undertaken in a classroom with children generates ethical encounters in its iteration, which merit reflection and analysis. These include encounters between the researcher and children, and potentially between the researcher and the gatekeepers of the research, such as parents, teaching staff, and the Board of Management.

The three 'ethically important moments' discussed refer to one particular research project that extended over the course of a number of weeks on site in primary schools. The data collection period represented mirrors that of multiple educational research projects which extend over a number of weeks or even months in schools. These are often facilitated by classroom teachers as part of postgraduate qualification requirements. Wherever data collection in such contexts exists, 'everyday ethics', of the kind analysed in this article, arise. Some ethical encounters may be possible to anticipate, for which preparation to address may be made as part of the completion of the institutional ethics process. Many other ethical encounters will, by their nature, be unexpected, and therefore, much more difficult, if not impossible, to strategize for. They demand 'ethics-in-action', akin

to Schon's (1991) 'reflection-in-action', where the researcher responds earnestly to ethical dilemmas as they arise.

The interrogation of ethically important research moments within a participatory research cycle reflects an opportunity for potentially rich learning for an engaged community of educational researchers in terms of ethics-in-action. Such learning may both inform future individual research project design and encourage collective contemplative practices in directing an emergent community-focused educational research trajectory. This echoes Christensen and Prout's (2002) call for research processes founded on dialogue. Through analysis, and ultimately change, the mechanical application of a method becomes redundant (Pretty et al. 1995).

The articulation and scrutiny of any 'ethically important moment' serve to offer insight into the nature of researching with young children for its mindful development as a practice. Thus, critical engagement, such as that offered by this article, endorses the view that researcher reflexivity on ethical considerations 'beyond what could have been predicted from the outset … lies at the heart of living ethical practice' (Phelan and Kinsella 2013, 81).

In order to work reflexively, Christensen and Prout (2002, 477) propose the research community 'develop a set of strategic values within which individual researchers can anchor the tactics required in their everyday practice' (Christensen and Prout 2002, 477). Researcher journaling can also be enlisted as an immediate means of contemplation on data collection episodes as they unfold, added to review of, and reflection on, the nature of the exchanges between participants. Reviewing and adjusting data collection processes based on a series of prompt reflective questions could serve to structure this practice for less experienced researchers. Alderson's (1995) ethical guidelines can serve as the basis for such ethical 'checking', in addition to some of the summary key questions provided by Christensen and Prout (2002). For example, under review and revision of research aims and methods the question is posed, 'Have children or their carers helped to plan or commented on the research?' (Christensen and Prout 2002, 490).

Ultimately, ethics-in-action makes demands of the researcher. In terms of classroom-based research, as evidenced, a novice teacher-researcher may well be able to rely on significant teaching experience, as he or she negotiates 'ethically important moments' judiciously as they arise. However, as long as the focus remains on obtaining institutional ethical clearance without any emphasis on reflecting upon how the research has progressed, the all-important research process in terms of ethics-in-action risks retaining the illusion of being secondary. This is a missed opportunity for educators and researchers alike, and ultimately a disservice to the children and young people who are purported to be at the very heart of our educational research endeavours.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Tríona Stokes is the lecturer in Drama Education at the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University. She completed her doctoral studies at Queen's University, Belfast, in 2016, focusing on young children's agency in school-based pretend play. A former primary teacher, Tríona enjoyed teaching in Irish and Australian contexts prior to obtaining her M. A. qualification in Drama and Theatre Education at Warwick University in 2004.

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