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# Researching with children: Insights from the Starting School Research Project

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## **Researching with children: Insights from the Starting School Research Project**

### **Abstract**

The *Starting School Research Project*, based at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, promotes the involvement of children in research concerning their transition to school. Using examples of approaches that have been utilised to engage children as part of the research on their transition to school, this paper explores some of the philosophical and methodological issues involved in this stance. Approaches including conversational interviews, oral and written journals, drawings, reflections and digital photographs have been successfully introduced in order to empower four- and five-year-old children to express what they see as important as they start school. Issues of equity and inclusiveness demand a variety of approaches such as these. However, as with all research approaches, both challenges and advantages are associated with each aspect. The paper concludes with a general consideration of the challenges and rewards of engaging young children in researching important aspects of their lives.

### **Background**

One of the principles underpinning the work of the *Starting School Research Project* in researching the transition to school has been to emphasise multiple perspectives: not just perspectives of school and teachers, but the perspectives of children, both before school and as they start school; the perspectives of parents; teachers in prior-to-school as well as school settings; and generally to consider all involved as stakeholders in the transition. One of the earliest findings of the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 1999; 2004a) was that what matters for children in the transition to school is different from what matters for adults.

As Cannella (1999) has noted, the presence of a scientific discourse of education has resulted in the dominance of some forms of knowledge and the creation of expert holders of that knowledge, who have rights to speak about and act upon that knowledge. In schools, rarely are young children recognised as holders of expert knowledge, or even experts on their own experiences:

The knowledges of particular groups/individuals are excluded and labelled inferior to others ... Certainly, knowledge is not accepted from particular groups, especially children who have not reached adolescence. Those who are often identified as major stakeholders in educational discourse are given no voice, much less equal partnership in the process ... we speak of educational reform and collaboration, but that collaboration is only with those who are adults. (Cannella, 1999, p. 39)

One of the aims of the *Starting School Research Project* is to analyse or deconstruct the discourses of school, and to reconceptualise the nature of transition as well as the experience and expectations of transition (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 2004a). The analysis has the aim of making a difference, of making new meanings—multiple meanings—about the transition to school.

Our start in this process has been to include children as active participants in research about starting school, to listen to their voices about what matters and to ensure that their voices are heard in decision making about the transition to school. We are keen not to trivialise children's involvement, not to treat them as novelties or to focus on children as "victims of

educational discourse” (Cannella, 1999, p. 42), but to respect their role and involvement in ways that recognise the competence of children and “introduces into the critical conversations the missing perspectives of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies-in-practice (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3).

To achieve this, the project generates “legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 4), while at the same time respecting what children have to say and the ways in which they say this: we must recognise children as social and cultural actors, whose “perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence” (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000, p. 31).

### **The project**

In the *Starting School Research Project* we have aimed to listen to children’s views and perspectives on starting school, to respect their experiences, and to seek ways to represent those views, perspectives and experiences that emphasise the children’s agendas. In working towards this, we have employed a range of approaches.

Underpinning each approach described below are relationships. Wherever possible, the project seeks to spend time establishing relationships with the adult and child participants building trust and respect. Children need time to develop trust and respect for the researchers. This can occur over time as children become familiar with the researchers and their presence and where the adults around them are comfortable in interactions with researchers and where mutual trust and respect is conveyed (Clancy, Simpson, & Howard, 2001).

### ***Conversations with children***

Rather than structured interviews, we have chosen to use conversations with children, usually in small groups in familiar settings. The aim of these conversations has been “to hand over the agenda to children, so that they can control the pace and direction of the conversation, raising and exploring topics” (Mayall, 2000, p. 133). Depending on the context, and the preference of the child/ren, conversations are audio-taped or recorded as notes. It is an important aspect of our work that we seek children’s permission to record their conversations.

The following conversation between a parent and child after the first day of school suggests that the child knows quite a lot about what happens at school and, in a conversation, is prepared to share that.

Parent: Tell us about school...

Child: Mrs Brown did some good teaching today.

I’ve got 2 buddies, I’m very lucky. No one else has 2 buddies.

Parent: How was your uniform?

Child: It was comfortable all day.

Parent: What happened after we left?

Child: We kept playing.

Then we decided to play in the kitchen.

We played with the baking set. It wasn’t long until the bell rang.

Parent: And then?

Child: We had to sit down on the purple area. Did you see it inside the classroom?

Parent: No.

Child: It’s where that yellow chair was. Then we had to listen to Mrs B.

Parent: What did she say?

Child: She says anything she likes. Then we go to morning tea, I mean recess. She called it recess.

Luke, Tim and Andy were discussing what would be different as they moved from preschool to school.

Luke: I'll have different friends. Because they [points] won't be there.  
Researcher: How will you make new friends?  
Luke: You just have to talk to some people and then they come friends.  
Tim: When you try and tell them something they just run off and ignore you.  
Andy: You could tell the teacher. They will say "Can you please make friends with him—who doesn't have any friends?"  
Tim: I might try to catch them.

Sometimes, children are most comfortable conversing in small groups. Among friends, children are often willing to discuss things that matter to them, and to build upon, or even contradict, statements made by others. Conversations among friends are often dynamic, with topics being changed to suit those of interest to the children involved, and questions being reworded in ways that make more sense to the participants. Hatch (1995, p.147) notes that "group interviews capitalize on social interaction, using it as a context to generate information".

Some advantages of engaging in conversations with children include:

- the potential for child control and direction;
- utilising a familiar context; and
- children's willingness to engage in conversations with friends.

Challenges in engaging in conversations with young children have included:

- the tendency for discussions to go away from the topic researchers are seeking input about;
- finding a suitable location that is comfortable and familiar, yet suitable for conversation without interruptions; and
- the importance of grouping children in ways that promote interaction, rather than encourage dominance by some members of the group.

### ***Picture books***

As an extension of encouraging conversations about starting school, without children feeling as if they are in a pressured situation, we have used discussions of children's books to stimulate conversations (Dockett, Whitton, & Perry, 2003). Many children's books relate stories and experiences of the first day of school. Some use familiar characters (such as Spot, Clifford, Franklin or other cartoon characters) to describe what the first days of school might be like and what will happen for children starting school. Such books often promote conversation about children's own experiences or expectations. The following conversation among a group of children soon to start school, was generated after reading *Clifford's First School Day* (Bridwell, 1999).

Cory: He [Clifford] made a mess at school  
Alex: Everywhere in the classroom!  
Jake: He was flying down the slide and flew into the sandpit!  
Researcher: Do you think your school will be like that?

Cory: I think there'll be millions of kids at my school.  
And they'll be 7, 8, 9, 10, 11...

Alex: And homework ... homework for me.

Jake: You have to write and do what the teacher says and you need to do maths.  
And you get into trouble, get time out...

Cory: Yeah, when you're naughty.

There are several advantages in using books to promote discussion, including:

- children can choose the books;
- reading and discussing books is often a familiar task;
- the books can be shared on many occasions; and
- the storylines in books tend to promote conversations and pretend play.

Some of the challenges include:

- the topics included in books may reflect adult, rather than child concerns about starting school;
- some books contain stereotypical images of schools and teachers;
- there is a general lack of diversity represented in books; and
- most books are about positive situations at school, with few recognising that tension or conflict occurs.

### ***Oral and written journals***

This is a relatively new strategy employed by the project, but we are keen to explore the potential of children keeping a record of what matters for them as they start school. The format of journals can be flexible. For example, in one case, a parent and a child have both recorded what is happening for them via email conversations with some other parents and children. In another case, a parent and child are having regular conversations, with the parent recording what the child has said and then checking with the child to make sure the record was accurate. Information from the school (such as details of special events, certificates) as well as work samples are added to the record as indicated by the child. We envisage journals that record ongoing interactions between adults and children occurring in situations such as conversations, role-play, or pretend play.

In the following role-play record, James adopts the role of the teacher showing a new parent around the school.

James: I've just come to this school to teach Kindergarten.  
You can call me Mr Prince.  
Would you like to go on a tour of the school?  
OK. This is the play area.  
You've got lots of things.  
And here's a play table.  
You play with stuff, like Bingo  
This is also where you sit down to have a story read to you.  
This should be called the playroom ... not the classroom [laughs].  
Except it's a classroom.  
This is my teacher's seat and you sit here [points to floor] and listen to me.  
Well.... You just sit down – like I used to do at school.

The following role-play occurred prior to the first parent-teacher interview at school. Will was unsure of what would be discussed at this interview. In the following role-play with his mother, he adopted the role of the teacher answering questions asked by the parent.

Mother: Hello Mrs B.  
Will: Hello Sue.  
Mother: Well, how is Will going at school?  
Will: Good.  
Mother: What is he doing really well at, at school?  
Will: Mm ... writing.  
Mother: Oh, that's good. Anything he's not so good at?  
Will: Mmmm.  
Mother: Is there anything he needs to improve?  
Will: Mm .....well ....mmmm .... No.  
Mother: Oh, that's good.  
Will: Well... maybe ... maybe tracing.  
Mother: He's not so good at tracing?  
Will: No. He could do that a bit better.

This was recorded in Will's journal, as were conversations between Will and his friend Sam, who was starting school in a different country. In his initial email, Will was keen to ask about what was happening for his friend.

Dear Sam,  
I have been having a nice time.  
How is your school going?  
Do you catch the bus, Sam?  
love will

Written journals could be kept by children themselves and may include:

- items collected from contact with the school, such as letters, notes;
- information about the school;
- children's drawings or comments;
- information the children have or wish to find out from the school; and
- initial thoughts about school, such as might be collated from brainstorming.

Advantages of using journals include the ability to record ongoing interactions, discussions, thoughts and experiences about school, and the flexibility of formats. Journals allow a range of materials to be collected over time, suggesting that perspectives differ across those different times and in different situations. As well as identifying trends, journals can be used to record changes over time.

Challenges have included:

- the process of keeping a journal can be time consuming for all involved;
- it is easy to miss an entry and then easy to let the process slip;
- children (and adults) sometimes get tired of talking about the one topic; and
- representing an ongoing process in a way that accurately reflects the intentions of the journalist (child).

### *Drawings*

The *Starting School Research Project* has used drawings in several different ways (Dockett & Perry, 2003a). One strategy involves inviting children to draw a picture of what they think school will be like (before they start school) and what it is like (when they are at school). Some children respond positively to the invitation to draw as they engage in conversations about starting school. This can help them feel comfortable, and also provide a non-verbal avenue of expression. When children are involved in a task such as drawing, there is a reduced need for eye contact. Sometimes, children are much more comfortable interacting when they do not feel the need to maintain eye contact with an unfamiliar adult. Having something concrete to focus on while talking can be a much more comfortable situation than facing someone in an interview context (Parkinson, 2001).

Figure 1. “I think school will be big.”

Figure 1 shows a drawing and accompanying comment from a child soon to start school. We rely on the comments from children as well as the drawing, considering them as a unit, rather than focusing just on the drawing or just on the comment. This is because drawings are very open to interpretation—an adult, researcher interpretation would probably be quite different from the artist’s interpretation. The focus on what children say, as well as what they draw, emphasises the importance of the process of drawing as well as the product (Kress, 1997). In many situations, children are eager to discuss their drawings, and this discussion provides critical information about the meaning the children have attributed to their drawing. We are also not assessing the drawing for aesthetic quality, rather focusing on the message about school conveyed through the drawing and the comments.

The advantages of using drawings in research interactions with children include:

- providing a non-verbal focus for expression, that can then be supported with verbal information;
- children can change drawings as they choose and as they work through the process of drawing – drawings can be added to or altered over time;
- children may be familiar with the activity of drawing; and
- drawings can take time, so that a quick response is not demanded.

Many of the challenges associated with asking children to draw about a particular topic are similar to the advantages. For example, the ability to change drawings and alter them

considerably means that what might start out as a drawing about school, might soon become a drawing of something completely different. As well, even at quite young ages, some children are convinced that they cannot draw, or draw in a way acceptable to adults. Classroom climate has a lot to do with this situation, where what has been established as acceptable or 'normal' drawing practice in classrooms influences what children are prepared to draw in that classroom. Further challenges relate to adult interpretations of drawings and the importance of ensuring that the messages of the artist or drawer, rather than the researcher, are foregrounded; and focusing on the messages conveyed rather than the skill in drawing.

### ***Reflections***

The use of specific instructions about drawings does seem to help focus children's attention on the task (Picard & Vinter, 1999). In some instances, we have provided a structure for children's drawings, asking them to reflect on what has happened for them over the school year. To do this, we have asked children to think about (and then draw and comment on) what it was like for them when they started school and what it is like for them after a year at school. The structure provided has been a large piece of paper, folded in half, with prompts on each half of the paper : *When I started school I .....* and *Now I .....* Many children have been eager to engage in such reflection (Dockett & Perry, 2004b).

Figure 2. Reflection on what has changed in the first year of school.

These reflections help us to recognise the significance of school and the time at school for children. Children know they have grown and changed, but often adults are focussed on what the children will be doing next year and how well prepared they are for it, and tend to forget the major changes occurring for children in the here and now. Children make their own assessments of their life at school and how it has progressed in ways that are quite different from adult assessments. We see the focus on issues important to children and the process of encouraging them to identify how they think they have changed as the advantages of this approach.

As with drawings in general, challenges related to this approach include ensuring that the interpretation belongs with the child, rather than the researcher; focusing on the message of the drawing, rather than the skill in drawing; and realising that some children do not like, or see the point, in drawings.

As a general point when asking children to draw and comment, we seek children's permission to make a copy of the drawing, rather than ask them to part with the drawing. Copies can be made with a digital camera, or a colour photocopies can be made. The importance of not asking children for the drawing is that we regard it as unreasonable to expect children to spend considerable time and energy creating a drawing, only to have it taken away.

### *Digital photographs*

In much of our work we are keen to explore what children think they need to know about school and what they would tell others about to start school. In one approach, we have used children's conversations as the starting point, and proceeded to record these views through digital photographs (Dockett & Perry, 2003b; in press; Dockett & Simpson, 2003). Whole group, as well as small group discussions were followed with children using a digital camera to record the things they thought new children needed to know, as the basis for constructing a text outlining the importance of each aspect. Small groups of children, accompanied by researchers, toured each school, with children contributing two photos each to the class book. Much discussion about which photos should be included in the book and what text should accompany the photos was needed before an agreed text and set of photos was compiled. (See Figure 3 for an example of photo and text.)

Figure 3. "This is our class tokens award chart for good work and good behaviour. If you get 5 bronze awards you get a silver award. If you get another 5 bronze awards, you get a gold award."

The purpose of the project was discussed with children: the aim was to share their knowledge and experience of school with children about to start school. The photos and text were combined into a book that could be shared with children about to start school. In some instances, these books were used during orientation to school sessions for new children and their families.

Understanding the context in which the photograph was taken is an important part of understanding the photograph itself. Background information, such as who was involved in taking the photo, when and with whom, and the conversations that occurred around the photo taking, all contribute to this context. As well, the relationships between those involved in taking the photo, the reason and purpose of the experience, and the explanation of why the photos were taken provide information that assists in the interpretation of the photographic data (Fasoli, 2003). For these reasons, photographs and comments are considered the unit of analysis. To ensure that the context of the photos was clear, video was used to record interactions and sessions in some locations.

Several advantages of this approach related to the children's use of technology. Not only were they competent with the cameras, they were excited to use 'good' equipment to photograph what was important to them. The children had a very active role in each aspect of this approach: they chose the topic of the photo; took the photo; made decisions about the appropriateness of the photo, deleting and retaking any that were not exactly as they wanted; and chose the text to accompany the photo.

Challenges related to this approach tended to be organisational, for example, ensuring that the groups of children and researchers could access all areas of the school and planning sufficient time for all children to be comfortable with the experience. Ethical issues were the focus of much attention, and in some schools, additional school staff accompanied each group. In other schools, more than one researcher participated in each photo-taking group. As in any group experience, researchers are challenged to facilitate the input of all children who want to contribute, rather than listening only to a dominant few. In addition, this approach resulted in some interesting power constructions and negotiations between adults and children, where the experts in the situation (the children) used their knowledge to take researchers to out-of-bounds areas and to engage in conversations aimed to deceive adults. For example, some children were adamant that it really was permitted to go out-of-bounds (Simpson, 2003). While presenting challenges, these negotiations indicate that children really did have some control over the context.

### ***Video recording of discussions about school***

At two of the sites where children were using digital cameras to record what mattered to them when starting school, we also videotaped their interactions and discussions about what photographs to take and why. No notes were taken by researchers during the actual photo-taking sessions. This meant that the focus was on the photo taking. Videotaping of interactions enables researchers and children to recall the context for taking specific photos and the discussions and interactions that surrounded this. Several researchers note the value of videotaped interactions, emphasising the focus on body language and facial expressions, as well as verbal interactions (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Video was used to inform the discussions about what text should go with the photos. Researchers could go back and share with children their original comments and plans, enabling children to revisit and elaborate on their initial comments. The importance of the video recordings was to ensure that the context of the photo taking was recorded.

Challenges related to videotaping interactions are often organisational. For example, taking videos requires equipment and, in a situation where groups are walking around a school, this equipment needs to be carried. Transcribing videos is a time-consuming task and sometimes, there seem to be almost too much information to attend to from videos.

## **Discussion**

### ***Outcomes***

There are certainly products of our research. These data consist of photographs with accompanying text, transcripts of conversations, drawings of school, videotapes of interactions—all of which convey children’s perspectives, understandings, experiences and expectations about school. Just as important has been the outcome that has seen children become more respected members of school communities. Children have demonstrated their expertise and competence and the levels of each of these have surprised some school personnel as well as some family members. The perspectives described by the children have stimulated change in several transition programs. These include changes in what new children are shown and told about the school and the involvement of children who have recently started school in transition programs (for examples see, Dockett & Perry, 2003a).

### ***Challenges***

As indicated in this paper, there are many strategies researchers can use to seek the views and perspectives of children. There will be no one ‘best’ approach that suits all children, or all contexts. Rather, researchers are encouraged to adopt approaches that are contextually relevant and that make sense to the children involved.

The approaches outlined in this paper present a range of strengths and challenges. The strengths generally relate to children’s potential control of, or at least their ability to exert influence over, the tasks. Facilitating this control may well mean that the data provided does not fit neatly with what the researcher was seeking. However, it usually does mean that the data is richer and more relevant than it may otherwise have been.

Many of the challenges related in this paper are organisational. Often, they involve having access to equipment, and time to explore issues of importance to children. At other times, they relate to ensuring that the data analysis reflects the intentions of the children involved.

We have endeavoured to use a range of approaches to engage children’s voices in our research on transition to school. However, we are wary of offering a recipe or formula for this. Greishaber and Cannella (1999) remind us that the lives of young children and their families are complex, “characterised by ... questions of culture, difference, ethnicity, class, privilege, and politics (to name just a few). Young children, their families, and all of us are tied to these issues and others that are embedded within historical, social, and political circumstance” (p. 4). These authors suggest that recognising and responding to this requires us all to “rethink relationships with those who are younger in ways that recognise agency, voice and complex identities” (Greishaber & Cannella, 1999, p. 3). In the context of research about starting school, this involves – at the very least – considering the decisions that are made for children by adults and actively listening to the issues, concerns and ideas children have about starting school.

As we work towards this aim, there remain a number of challenges for the *Starting School Research Project* and its intention to include children’s perspectives and experiences in research. These come from ongoing interactions with children as well as some issues raised by Jipson and Jipson (2001). They are encapsulated in the following questions:

- What are the tasks children are asked to do? How relevant or important are they to those children, as opposed to the researchers?
- How can we be confident that the data we get from children is reflective of their thought and understandings?

- How can we faithfully represent children's knowledge and understanding?
- Do we ground the research in what matters to children, in the interpretation of children, or is the focus what matters to the researcher and what counts as data?
- Does the research matter to children and is it an important step in improving their position?
- What do we do to meet the concerns expressed by children in the research discourse?

While we seek ways to involve children in research, we need to ensure that the strategies we use are based on relevant, meaningful and important tasks. There is a need to avoid gimmicky strategies that serve to trivialise children's involvement and that result in children being regarded as 'cute'. Following this, it is critical that the information provided by children is used in ways to improve their situations.

Thiessen (1997) outlines three levels of engagement with research that acknowledges children's perspectives: knowing about children's perspectives; acting on behalf of children's perspectives; and working with children's perspectives. The research approaches detailed in this paper represent each of these three levels. At the first level, the approaches highlight what can be learned from the perspectives of children. Clearly, much can be learned about their experiences of school and their sense of themselves within school, from actively seeking their perspectives. At the second level, representing children's perspectives can present significant challenges for researchers. It is imperative that any representations of children's views are authentic representations, rather than those of researchers. Thirdly, it is important to constantly seek ways to include the perspectives of children in decisions that impact on them and to use children's perspectives to inform and improve educational practice.

Within our project, we seek to include children's perspectives, experiences and expectations as valued and reliable information. In doing so, we recognise that:

- it is important to highlight and value children's participation in research;
- adult and child perspectives may differ considerably;
- it must be an aim to use the insights gained from children to benefit the children themselves;
- listening to children's perspectives and perceptions complicates both research and pedagogy;
- listening to children's perspectives and perceptions adds a great richness to both interactions and curriculum (in this case, the curriculum of school transition); and
- there are some potential pitfalls of listening. Clark and Moss (2001) ask
  - Do we respect young children's privacy?
  - Do we recognise that listening is not a right and that some children may wish to remain silent? and
  - Is listening part of a regulatory agenda?

In summary, we need to ask whether listening to children's voices benefits the children themselves.

Worldwide there is growing recognition of the importance of listening to, and acting upon, children's voices. This paper describes a range of strategies that may be appropriate to use with young children as we seek to hear their perceptions, expectations and experiences. Respecting children as individuals will mean that there is no recipe for engaging children in research. Realising that different approaches will be meaningful for different children in

different contexts will, hopefully, move research away from the notion that young children are not capable of being meaningfully engaged in research, towards the notion that researching with children can be both challenging and rewarding and that many research outcomes rely not on the capabilities of children, but rather on the willingness of researchers to consider the competence and agency of young children themselves.

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