And they say don't work with children……

Abstract:

This paper explores the role and method a researcher must consider when using children as research objects. Three areas are discussed; the researcher's role, children as research objects and the results and conclusions.

Researchers must consider an appropriate role when researching with children with the most advocated being the "least adult role", as there are suggestions that children do not make good respondents. A suitable methodological approach has to be taken allowing children to be creative and to ensure effective responses. 'Doing artwork' combined with questions provided creative responses.

Four drawing sessions were conducted with preschool children from two nurseries. The aim of these sessions was to identify if the children could actually complete drawings, state who had given the gift to them and pictorially represent what they thought of the giver.

The pictorial results were coded and the results identified that as all children produced a drawing 'doing artwork' is an acceptable methodological approach for this group of respondents. A majority could remember who had given them a gift, but could not present their feelings of the gift giver pictorially suggesting that children may not be suitable respondents overall.

Keywords: Children, Role, Artwork, Qualitative

Track: Marketing Research incorporating Qualitative Enquiry in Marketing

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss conducting research with pre school children. This is examined in the context of the role a researcher should adopt and the use of children as suitable research respondents.

The objectives of this research are to;

- Outline literature in connection with the role of the researcher and the use of children as research respondents
- Discuss an appropriate research tool which facilitates using children as research objects
- Present the research findings and highlight conclusions

Role in researching with children

Researching with children or young people poses a number of issues for the researcher. Predominately, these issues pertain to the ethical and moral standpoints which need to be considered when working with minors, as a notion exists that minors may be deemed unable to give consent to research being conducted. This was suggested by Scott (2000), who stated "that children lack the capacity for abstract thinking that characterises the 'maturity' of later adolescence and adulthood and this would fail to meet the criteria of good research respondents" (cited in Christenson and Prout 2002 p.101). These concepts have to be tempered with the additional element of the role the researcher must adopt when studying the social worlds of children as the "central methodological problem facing an adult participant observer of children concerns the membership role" Mandell (1988 p.434) (Adler and Adler 1987).

Mandell (1988) discussed 3 roles for adults studying children; the 'detached observer role', the 'marginal semi participatory role' and the 'complete involvement participant role' (least adult role). The 'detached observer role', advocated by Fine (1987) discusses the fact that "age roles and adult ethnocentrism preclude a complete participant role" (Mandell 1988 p. 434), as an impersonal stance is impossible to take Mandell (1988), Adler and Adler (1987), Corsaro (1985) and Coenen (1986). Additionally, it is suggested by some (Fine 1987; Corsaro 1985) that age and authority separate children from adults, whilst others (Coenen 1986; Damon 1977) indicate that adults can only assume a detached observers role, based on the cultural, social and intellectual gaps between adults and children.

The second role to be noted is the 'marginal semi participatory role' arising from the work of Fine and Glassner (1979) and Fine (1987). In recognising some dimensions of age and authority and whilst focusing on the similarities of adults and children they proposed 4 emergent roles being; Supervisor, Leader, Observer and Friend – with the latter being the most advocated as it assumes the "less threatening role of non-interfering companion" (Mandell 1988 p.435)

Mandell (1988) adopted the third role 'the complete involvement (participant) role' mirroring Waskler (Waskler 1994 p.38) in her 1988 study. This involves blending in "with those being studied" (Waskler 1994 p.38), allowing for the adult to be accepted by the children to a certain extent as part of their ongoing activities. Mandell's (1988) research ratifies the fact that few qualitative studies of the children's world exist.

Viewing children as research objects
Another perspective requiring consideration is that of how researchers actually view children as they are "pivotal to the power relations that ensue between researcher and participant" (Fraser et al 2004 p. 85). Four classifications are identified by Christenson and Prout (2002 p. 480); Children as object (adult perspective), children as subject (child centred), children as social actor (children as participant), children as participant/co researcher (role in the process of research) (Thomas and O Kane 1998; Clark 2004 in Fraser et al 2004).

These classifications give more weight to the dimensions considered in the methodological approach when researching with children. Jenks (2000) states that ethnography is a most effective "methodology to be employed in the study of childhood. Children are able to engage and they can be engaged" (cited in Christenson and James (2000 p.71). Clark (2004) supports this in her discussion of the 'Mosaic Approach' for child research, where it offers a framework for incorporating multi methods allowing for "triangulation across the different methodologies" (Clark 2004 p.144). The use of the 'Mosaic Approach' is to a certain extent supported by previous research conducted by Morgan et al (2002) and Darbyshire et al (2005) whose research identified that working with children demands flexibility and creativity. These underpinnings were bourn from an exploratory study in a nursery type institution. The methodology Clark (2004) supported "played to young children's strengths" (Clark 2004 p.144).

A type of data collection which could be utilised to generate creativity is that of "doing artwork", a technique ratified by Cavin's (1990) research basing itself on the use of sociological methodology. Pahl (1999) noted though issues arising with 'doing artwork' involved not knowing the meaning behind them. This is supported by Mandell (1990) who added in questions when using artwork as a projective technique and Coates's (2002) research which identified children often talk to themselves when drawing thus giving information to support the artwork. This poses a major issue for the researcher as the drawback of using drawings as an exploratory method is going to be understanding the meaning behind them. Chan (2006) managed to code children's character drawings by use of visual components being objects (toys) and facial expressions. What is clear though is as suggested by Pahl (1999 cited in Coates 2002 p.23) "that drawings help children externalise a thought and is a first step in creating symbols to represent real objects."

Methodology
The research phase consisted of 4 stages, permission, research boundaries, observation/pilot and the actual research. Permission was sought from two nurseries, which were selected by means of a non-probability convenience sampling procedure (Saunders et al 2003) and an informal interview conducted with a Centre Manager to outline two sessions involving 'doing artwork' (Cavin 1990), which would appeal to the children. The artwork sessions had the following objectives;
1. To identify if the child could draw their favourite toy gift received for their Christmas/Birthday
2. To investigate if they could recall who had given them the gift by means of answering a question
3. To identify if they could pictorially represent how they felt about the gift giver.

The second stage of the research phase, entitled 'research boundaries' involved obtaining Disclosure and ethical consent. Disclosure was obtained through the Disclosure Scotland procedure and ethical compliance was sought through an Ethical Research Committee. Part

of this gaining ethical consent involved sending letters, written in consultation with the Centre Manager to all intended participants' parents/guardians to seek permission for their child to take part in the research. This was followed up with a reminder where necessary. This was sent to all parents/guardians of the children in the Pre school rooms (n1 = 28 and n2=22), with a reminder follow up about a week later. The only information required on the children participating was limited to gender, age and the drawings.

The observation phase involved making a role decision and completing a pilot artwork session. The complete 'involvement participant role' or 'least adult role' (Mandell 1988) was eventually adopted. The 'artwork session' (stage 3) was piloted with a pre-school child to iron out any issues with the planned research event. Here coloured paper and pens were provided and the questions asked of the child to test if she was able to provide drawings as answers. There were no issues here and drawings were provided willingly and creatively for both the Christmas and birthday sessions. This was rolled out (stage 4) as four separate morning sessions at the two nurseries with children in groups of no more than six. The researcher acted as the session facilitator. Children were excused if they did not wish to participate and upon completion of the task children were rewarded with a sticker.

Results and Findings
The respondent profile for both nurseries was as follows. Twenty eight (28) and twenty two (22) possible respondents were approached from nursery one and nursery two respectively. Permission was obtained from 28 parents/guardians in total (n1=19, n2=9) composed of 15 boys and 9 girls, being a 68% uptake for nursery one and 40.1% for nursery two The average age of the respondents from each nursery was 50 months for one and 46.4 months for two. The respondent numbers for nursery one was higher than two, primarily because of the larger numbers in the first place and availability of the researcher to conduct the research. This was commented upon by one of the nursery staff who said that I got more responses to my letter than they normally did. Additionally, there were problems with children's availability i.e. although permission had been granted they were not in attendance on the day of the session. To facilitate discussion of the results sections of the observations stage will be discussed and one set of pictures will be analysed whilst short comments will be made on the others.

In discussing the observation role, the researcher anticipated adopting 'the detached observer role' (Fine 1987) based on the criteria previously noted. However, during the observation stage it became apparent the 'marginal semi participatory role' (Mandell 1988) was being adopted and finally the children were viewed as 'participants in the least adult role' (Mandell 1988). This was evidenced by a number of children becoming curious as to my presence and wanting to know what I was doing there. Additionally, they would ask if I could I help them with their daily routine, or indeed the children accepted me as one of them, with conversations taking place such as:

Conversation A – Outside in the garden
Child A   "can you help me tie my shoe lace"
Researcher   "well not really, you will have to ask one of your teachers to do it for you"
Child A   "why, you are a big person"
Researcher   "yes I know that, but I am not supposed to help you just now"
Child A   Sad face
Researcher   "come on then I will do it for you as your teacher is busy"
Conversation B - Outside in the garden sitting on the chair.
Child B   "what are you doing, are you here to play ?"

Researcher	"well not really, I have come to watch the kind of things you get up to in a day"
Child C	"do you want to play with us then"
Researcher	"can do, but I need to let your teachers know that I am going to do that in case they say it is not all right"
Child D	"they will say yes and then we can have snack together"

Conversation C – Coming inside from the garden

Child A	"can you unzip my jacket please"
Researcher	"no problem, come on I will get you sorted, where are your indoor shoes"
Child B	"can you help me too"
Researcher	"of course, just wait a wee minute and I will get to you next"
Child B	"Are you going to stay for lunch, I want you to"
Child C	"do you want to see our picture board, in the cosy corner?"
Researcher	"sounds fun, come on then"

Drawings as research information

In examining the drawings a crude form of coding was adopted to formulate discussion. This was based on the work of Chan (2006). Four drawings are shown (Figures A – D) from one male (1) and one female (2) child for Christmas and Birthdays. For the Christmas session male (1) drew a house (Fig A) which was instantly recognisable but upon questioning the child stated this was an Ark. He was able to tell me he got it from Santa (when probed Santa was Dad). For drawing B the female child (2) drew a princess castle (Fig B) which although very colourful and bright it was not instantly recognisable. She went on to say it came from Santa and she was pleased with him. Both children were pleased with the 'gift giver' but neither could indicate this feeling by drawing a face to represent their feeling.

Take in Figure A and B

Turning to the birthday artwork sessions male (1) drew a sea scene with a boat (Fig C) which he said he was given by his Dad. Here the boat drawing was semi recognisable and needed probing for confirmation. Female child 2 drew a 'My Little Pony' (Brand Fig D) which was semi recognisable and once again extremely colourful. Child 1 said the boat came from his Dad, making him feel smooth and child 2 said her birthday gift, which she got from Santa made her feel happy and full of laughter. In both cases again no faces were drawn to show the feelings they had towards the 'gift giver', and the feeling of smooth from the male child could represent a misunderstanding of the checking question.

Take in Figure C and D

In summarising the findings from all the sessions all of the respondents (n=18+21) were able to produce a drawing of some description, not always recognisable, showing their favoured toy gifts from Christmas and birthdays. For the sessions a majority of the children could remember who the gift giver was being Santa (n=12) for Christmas and (n=9) for Birthdays. Only one boy and three girls (n=4) could not remember who gave them the favoured gift at Christmas whilst seven children (n=7) could not remember who gave them the birthday gift. Others said the gift was from a relative/friend (n=2 for Christmas and n=5 for birthdays).

The main feeling the children had of the 'gift giver' for the Christmas session was of happiness (n=10) with five (n=5) children not being able to express an opinion at all and two (1 male and 1 female) children stating they were grumpy with the 'giver'. For the birthday drawings many children (n=14) felt happy with the 'gift giver' but five (n=5) could not remember how they felt and two (n=2) felt grumpy with those children either registering their dislike of the gift or the person. In total only nine (n=9) respondents could represent their feelings towards the 'gift giver' pictorially, the remainder had to be asked and a note taken.

Additionally, two female children opted to draw two pictures, whilst a set of twins provided the same type of drawing. Some of the children got bored and ran off before the session ended, whilst others did not seem to have the full capabilities to complete the task and failed to answer the questions.

Discussion

In discussing the research findings the following is evident. Initially the role assumed for the observation phase was the 'detached observer's role' (Fine 1987) which evolved and changed to the 'least adult role' (Mandell, 1998) (Waskler 1994). This then proved to be successful in that the children were happy to participate and were interested in what I was doing. Additionally, this role was extended into treating the respondents as participants/co-researchers in the 'artwork' sessions. This supports and adds to the findings of Mandell (1988), Waskler (1971) and Thomas O Kane (1998) by showing that roles may become evolutionary whilst actually conducting the research and the researcher should learn to expect the unexpected when researching with children under five. It supports Adler and Adler (1987) by confirming that the role may be the central methodological problem when using children as respondents.

Secondly, the artwork session identified that all of the participating children (Christmas n= 18, Birthday n=21) could produce a drawing of some description, albeit not always recognisable. Some could not remember who had given the gift (Christmas n= 4, Birthday n=7), with some (n= surprisingly stating that Santa (n=8) was the Birthday gift giver. When asked to further the answers a number could not express their feeling for the gift giver pictorially (Christmas n= 3) (Birthday n=6). This adds to Clark's (2004) research on the 'Mosaic Approach' where a multi method approach had to be adopted to garner responses. As here questions had to be added to confirm the research being conducted. It also add to Jenks (2000) and Cavin's (2006) findings, where ethnography and artwork respectively were suggested as useful tools for researching with children, in this setting this was not always the case. It also reinforces Scott's (2000) point showing that children, in this case less than five years old, may lack the capabilities to be good research respondents.

In respect of ratifying the drawings the main drawback or limitation is the same as that noted by Chan (2006) and Pahl (1999). Using drawings as an exploratory method makes understanding the meaning difficult Pahl (1999) and here a crude form of coding was used. The use of this crude coding adds another dimension to Chan's (2006) findings but more research would be required to extend this point.

Conclusions

This paper has examined literature on researching with children, outlined the methodology and discussed the research findings. In conclusion the following is clear

- The role adopted by the researcher is of vital importance. This research highlighted the role adopted had to change to reflect the nature of the respondents. Further research would need conducted to identify if the least adult role is viable with under five year olds. Additionally there needs to be some inclusion of how bias may affect findings.
- Researching with children has been shown to be challenging as there needs to be a creative approach. A projective technique was used here but it failed to get full answers without adapting the research as it was being conducted. Research with other age ranges needs conducted to identify if this technique fits with slightly older children, to extend this finding. Additionally, this may seek to add to the fact that although children may not make the best respondents they may make an interesting starting point in investigating methodological approaches.

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Appendices 1

Figure A Christmas Drawing Male 1
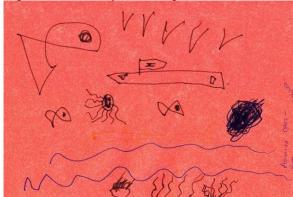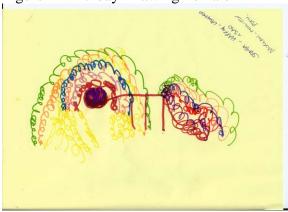

Figure B Christmas Drawing Female 2

Figure C Birthday Drawing Male 1

Figure D Birthday Drawing Female 2

Appendices 2

Table 1 Nursery One and Two Christmas Session Comments

Xmas					
Male	Drawing	Giver	Made child feel	Face Drawn	Nursery
	House/Ark	Santa (Dad)	Happy	No	1
	Football	Can't remember	Happy	No	1
	Robbers	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	1
	Bendy Bus	Santa	Laughing	No	1
	Ball	Santa	Happy face	Yes	1
Same child 2 drawings	Bouncy Ball	Santa	Nice fun	No	1
	Light Sabre	Santa	Good fun	No	1
	Bike	Santa	Happy	No	2
	House	Can't remember	Don't' know	No	2
	Army House	Santa	Grumpy	No	2
Female	Ball	Santa	Not answered	No	1
	Bratz Pony	Child herself	Happy	No	1
	Princess Castle	Santa	Please	No	1
	Dolly	Santa	Happy	No	2
	Mini Cooper	Santa	Grumpy	Yes	2
	Scooter	Santa	Smiley	Yes	2
	Can't remember	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	2
	Football/Nemo	Grandpa	Can't remember	No	2
Totals	N= 18 10 male and 8 female				

Table 2 Nursery One and Two Birthday Session Comments

Male	Drawing	Giver	Made child feel	Face Drawn	Nursery
Birthday					
	Boat	Daddy	Smooth	No	1
	Lofty from Bob the Builder	Can't remember	Smile	No	1
	Sword	Dad	Smile	No	1
	Pirate	Santa	Happy	No	1
	Car	Can't remember	Happy	No	1
	Racing car game	Can't remember	Happy	Yes	1
	Castle	Daddy	Round face	Yes	1
	Power Ranger	Santa	Happy	Yes	2
Female	Star	Santa	Fine	No	1
	Dolly	Can't remember	Can't remember	Yes	1
Same child 2 drawings	Sunflower	Can't remember	Felt fine	No	1
	Sunflower	Santa	Grumpy	Yes	1
	Sleeping Beauty	Santa	Smiley	No	1
	Sleeping	Sister	Can't remember	No	1
Same child 2 drawings	Phone	Nursery Friend	Happy	No	1
	My Little pony	Santa	Laughed	No	1
	Scooter	Santa	Happy	Yes	2
	A Flap	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	2
	Scooter	Santa	Happy	No	2
	Can't remember	Santa	Can't remember	No	2
	Dressing up clothes	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	2
Totals	N= 21 8 male and 13 female				