

# “Why have you not written my name?:” Collaborative research with children

magis



“¿Por qué no has escrito mi nombre?”: investigación colaborativa con niños

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**Abstract**

Drawing on research findings from a longitudinal ethnography exploring difference, identity and peer friendships this paper reveals how children actively negotiated their participation in the study via writing both in terms of “writing as data collection” and “writing as analysis.”

The paper explores the ways in which children actively sought to participate in the research study through producing their own visual and written data, analysing this data and reflecting on the written research outputs. Actively participating in this study gave children opportunities to reflect on their literacy learning and consolidate the learning that took place within the formal school context.

**Keywords**

Children; ethnography; literacy; participatory research

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**Resumen**

Partiendo de resultados de estudios etnográficos longitudinales para explorar la diferencia, la identidad y la amistad entre pares, este documento revela cómo los niños negocian su participación en el estudio a través de la escritura, tanto en términos de “la escritura como recolección de datos” y “la escritura como análisis”.

Este documento explora las maneras en las que los niños buscaron activamente participar en este estudio de investigación a través de la producción de sus propios datos visuales y escritos, el análisis de estos y la reflexión sobre los resultados escritos de la investigación. La participación activa de los niños les dio oportunidades para reflexionar sobre su aprendizaje lectoescritor y consolidar el aprendizaje que ocurre dentro del contexto escolar.

**Palabras clave**

Niño; etnografía; alfabetización; investigación participativa

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**Article description | Descripción del artículo**

Reflexion article derived from the research project A  
*Longitudinal Ethnography Exploring Young Children's Social  
Identity and Peer Friendships.*

## Introduction

Over the last two decades global commitment to children's rights has led to the development of sociological and educational theories that view "children as competent and capable social actors who hold important perspectives on social life that need to be heard and valued" (Barley 2014, p. 4) (see Christensen & Prout 2005; Corsaro, 2004; James & James, 2001; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, for more details). In turn these theories have encouraged researchers from around the world to move away from the adult-centric frameworks that were predominant in research with children up until this point (Cisneros & Neumann, 2009). Instead researchers adopted child-centred frameworks which focus on encouraging participatory approaches to uncover children's own views and perspectives on their social worlds (Cheney, 2011; Clark, 2005; Cocks, 2006; Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2009). Subsequently, an array of visual and art-based methods have been developed to allow researchers to fully access "the hundred languages of children" (Malaguzzi, 1993). Despite this, there is limited research that explores young children's participation in research via writing (Albon & Barley, 2018).

One such approach that places the participant at the heart of the strategy is ethnography. As Cheney (2011) argues ethnography's longitudinal approach necessitates meaningful research relationships be built with participants. These meaningful relationships, which by their very nature encourage participation, are essential within a child-centred framework. Clearly this poses some ethical challenges though when carefully implemented ethnography can be instrumental in reducing power differentials between the researcher and participant.

## The Field Location

Drawing on research findings from a longitudinal ethnography exploring notions of difference, identity and peer friendships this paper will show how young children can actively participate in a research project. In order to do this, the paper will focus on writing within a research context and

how these activities can not only direct the course of a study but provide literacy learning opportunities for the children involved.

This ethnography followed the same class every two years during their primary school education. This paper reflects on two periods of fieldwork with the class when they were in their Reception year (aged 4-5) and then again in Year 4 (aged 8-9) within a multi-ethnic school in the north of England (Barley, 2014). The class was in an inner-city school, called Sunnyside<sup>1</sup>, where the majority of pupils are from a diverse range of cultural minority “groups” within the city. I spent ten months over the course of three terms<sup>2</sup> with the class during their Reception year and seven months over the course of two terms with the class when they were in Year 4.

The majority of children in the study were from North or Sub-Saharan African families, some were new to the UK as well as the school at the start of the study. Arabic and Somali were the two key languages, other than English, that were spoken in the class. Most children took part in the study in English though the school’s multilingual and bilingual support workers were used as translators when appropriate.

Children were involved in designing the focus of the study, data collection and analysis. Their involvement in each of these stages of the study are considered in this paper as well as the children’s reflections on written research outputs.

While a number of the children featured in this paper were bilingual, I am not making any assertions between bilingualism and research writing rather these children were representative of my overall sample and wider interest in difference, identity and the development of peer friendships.

## Data Collection

Ethnography is a research approach that involves extended fieldwork, where participant and non-participant observational data is combined with data from other sources to present an accurate reflection of participants’ social worlds (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999). While observations and written fieldnotes are an intrinsic part of ethnography a multi-method approach is also essential (Wolcott, 1999).

The data collection examples discussed in this paper are all drawn from the first stage of fieldwork when the children were in their Reception year (aged 4-5).

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1 Names of places and individuals have been changed throughout to ensure anonymity.

2 A term, or semester, consists of approximately 13 weeks in England.

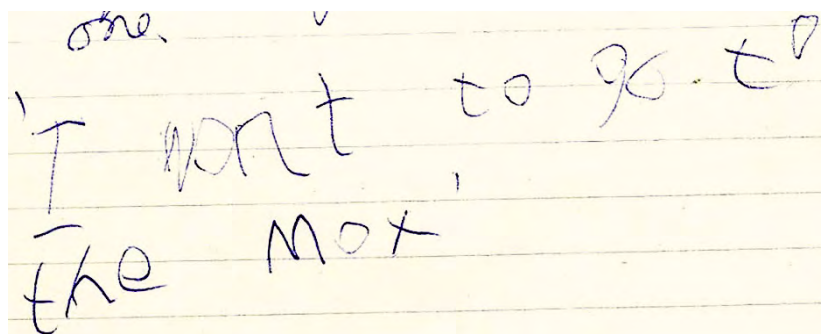
### Collaboratively Producing Fieldnote Data

How and when fieldnotes are produced within the field is a process that differs by field location as participants are inherently part of this data collection process. The way in which this is done must be thoughtfully negotiated with participants. Breglia (2009) calls this process the "work-break game." In my own research, these negotiations were central to the process of building rapport as the children had not been involved in a research project before. When introducing myself to the class, I related my research to the project work that they do at school. In doing so I positioned myself as an adult researcher who lacks knowledge, as Mayall (2008) calls for, and in doing so required the children to teach me about their social worlds.

The children became interested in my fieldnote book which I always carried around with me. Writing fieldnotes soon became a collaborative activity where the children actively sought to contribute directly to my note-book via mark makings, drawings and writing.

Figure 1

*Extract from fieldnote book*



Amir (5 years old): —I want to go to the mosque

*Source: Own elaboration*

At some times if the children were very engaged in their game they would dictate for me what they wanted me to write about them and in doing so directed how they were represented in my fieldnote data. One example is included below when we were playing in the Early Years Outdoor Play Area:

Daud (4 years old) comes over to where I am sitting on the edge of the stage and stands and looks over my shoulder. He scans the page of my fieldnote book and asks "Why have you not written my name?." I explain that I couldn't as he has been inside working in the classroom and has only just come outside a few minutes ago. He agrees that this is a valid reason for not writing about him and then says "But now I'm having a sleepover.

Write that!" I tell him that I will and he runs off back to the climbing frame where the other boys are playing (Fieldnote extract 1: Early Years Outdoor Play Area, cited in Barley, 2013).

While the interest in my fieldnote data, as described above, can be viewed as a way of safeguarding ongoing consent, the children's interest also enabled the ongoing collaborative analysis of data. This allowed me to check and if required revise my interpretation of the piece of data under scrutiny. Following Pryor & Ampiah's (2004) "data chain model" I developed new research questions based on the children's own analysis.

Although I allowed children to directly contribute to my fieldnote book during specific times, I had found out, during my familiarisation period that this approach also hindered data collection as it only allowed a single child to participate at any given time and additionally I was left without a way to record my own notes for substantial periods of time (Barley & Bath, 2014). In order to minimise this, I gave children separate pieces of paper from my notebook so that we were all able to record our data simultaneously. In doing so we also discussed and analysed the data as an ongoing process while it was being produced. This enabled the children to direct the focus of the research while also allowing me to continue my own observations. Discussing fieldnotes with the children in this way allowed me to make sure that my initial data analysis was not "interpreted through the lens of my own ideological stance but that children's emic interpretations of their social worlds were elicited" (Barley 2014, p. 26).

### Initiating Research Conversations

Adapting the principles of "sustained shared thinking," which starts from the idea "that young children actively construct their understandings within a social and physical environment" (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p. 6), I initiated research conversations using materials that were already freely available in the children's school environment. This approach builds on the notion of "active learning" (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995) and necessitates that the teacher, or in this case the researcher, is aware of and responsive to the individual child's understandings of their social world. Only when this principle has been implemented the researcher and child can then co-construct an idea or concept (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

These principles of "sustained shared thinking" support ethnography's own practice of allowing the data to emerge from the relationship that the ethnographer is able to build with their participant. Consequently, at the beginning of each research activity I outlined to the children what the activity involved and which research question it was designed to answer.

This gave the children the information that they needed in order to make an informed decision about whether or not they wished to participate in the activity. Each research activity was developed to start a research conversation relating to a research theme. This approach meant that the children were actively involved in producing visual and verbal data.

### Participatory Visual Methods

Participatory visual methods, such as the use of children's art work and photo journaling, are becoming a key aspect of educational ethnographies, especially when undertaking research with children (Clark & Moss, 2001; Coates, 2004; Oh, 2012). Including children within these participatory methods is "frequently presented as a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of children from passive participants to active, knowledgeable social agents able to contribute to the production of knowledge that is not solely reliant on the verbal" (Barley & Russell, 2018, p. 3). When combined with observational data participatory visual methods "can allow for different types of data to emerge by encouraging a shift in focus and reduction in power differentials" (Barley & Russell, 2018, p. 8). These participatory visual methods also present an opportunity for literacy learning in an informal context.

Some researchers have argued that "creative" visual methods should be viewed as more "appropriate" and "engaging" for children than more traditional "adult-centric" approaches (Punch, 2002). These arguments often imply that children, and in particular young children, are not capable of engaging with more traditional "adult-centric" methods of data collection. This is not the argument that I am making here as my work clearly shows that young children can, and do, actively engage with traditional methods of data collection, such as fieldnote data, and can offer sophisticated commentary on the research process and their representation within it (Barley & Russell, 2018).

Despite there being numerous examples of older children writing within a research context over a number of years (for example, Hohti, 2016; Kellett, Forrest, Dent & Ward, 2004; Nic-Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2006; Milstein, 2010) in early childhood research writing is often still viewed as an inappropriate means with which to engage with young children in meaningful ways as it is thought that they do not "understand" writing both in terms of the process of writing and the end product. Clark's (2011) map making exercise with 3-5 years old that combined visual elements with both the child and researcher's written annotations has started to counter this discourse. My work with fellow educational ethnographers adds to this critique (Barley & Russell, 2018; Albon & Barley, 2018).

### "My friends are..." picture

Adapting the approach previously taken by Coates (2004), during the first stage of data collection for the current study, I wanted to use children's drawings and accompanying interviews to explore the children's perspectives of their peer friendships. While I was deciding on the best approach to do this, Daud (4 years old) gave me an idea for an activity to capture this data. As can be seen from the fieldnote extract below he also expressly gave me permission to use this idea in my project:

During an observation session in January, Daud comes over to where I am sitting writing my fieldnotes and says to me "I want to do some writing too." I tell him to go fetch some paper and a pencil and bring it over. He comes back and tells me that he wants to write his friends' names down and say "we are going to the park." He asks me to help him spell his friends' names so I ask him whose name he would like to write first, to which he replies Amir. I start spelling Amir's name for him and as I do Amir comes over and joins us saying he wants to help. Daud then decides he wants to write Mubarak's name and asks Amir if he can help him. The two boys work together writing down their friends' names as well as the sentence "we went to the park" (Fieldnote extract 1: Early Years Indoor Play Area, cited in Barley, 2013).

Drawing on Daud's idea I designed an activity sheet to use as part of a research conversation about children's friendships at school.

Figure 2

Example of Deka's "My friends are..." picture



Source: Own elaboration



Actively involving children in design of a research study, or as in this case part of a study, helps to reduce the power differentials between ethnographer and participant. Further, adapting the children’s ideas for research activities allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings in a way that they are familiar with as advocated by Johnson (2008).

### **“Where I am from...” book**

During observations, some children liked to engage in conversations with their peers about the different parts of the world that they were from. This was an area that I decided to explore further via a specific research activity. To do this I designed a book focussing on my own cultural and national identity entitled “Where I am from: Scotland.” This book was designed to tell the children something about my own country, such as traditional food, before asking the child a question on the same topic. In doing this I emphasised that I was not from “here” and shared aspects from my own background building further rapport with the children. The questions in the book were carefully framed to allow the children to express that they were from “here” or another part of the world and in doing so did not “other” them as Raj (2003) warns is the danger when exploring these issues. The way in which this research activity developed into a second research activity is highlighted in the fieldnote extract below:

After reading the Scotland book with Mustafe and Kareem (both 4 years old), Mustafe asks me if I have a Libya book. I tell him that I don’t but ask if he would like us to make one together. He replies saying that he does as “Libya, it’s important” and I tell him that we can on another day (Fieldnote extract 1: Early Years Indoor Small Group Learning Area, cited in Barley, 2013).

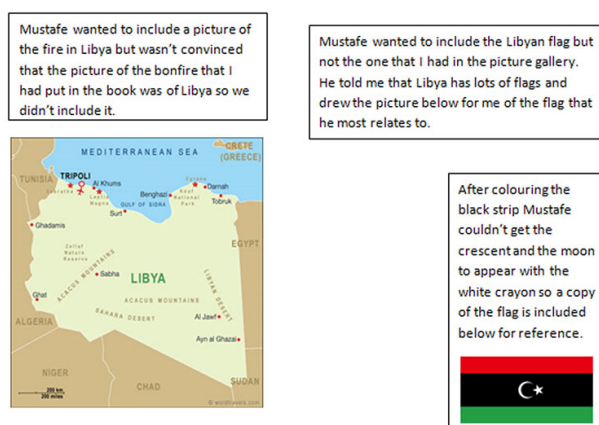
Prior to this conversation, I had wanted to design a research activity that required the children to illustrate and write a book about their identity, but a similar activity was being used in the classes’ literacy lesson. To ensure ongoing informed consent, and importantly the voluntary nature of participation in a research study, I decided however not to directly adapt a classroom tool into a research activity.

After the above conversation that I had with Mustafe I revisited this idea. In order to keep this activity separate from the physical books that the children were making in their literacy lessons I designed the tools to create a digital book. After an initial stage of analysis, I developed an on-line picture library that depicted images relating to the research themes that emerged from the data. The children then used these images, their

own drawings and typed data to create a digital book called “Where I am from...” Collaboratively producing visual data in this way has been highlighted by ethnographers as a way of managing potential power differentials within a research study as the participants are able to choose which images to represent themselves and their cultural heritage (Morphy & Banks, 1997). In analysing this data, I annotated the digital books with extracts from the research conversation that was simultaneously conducted with the child who created the book.

Figure 3

Extract from Mustafe's “Where I am from... Libya” book<sup>3</sup>



## Where I am from...

### Libya.

There is fire.

There is lots of Libyan flags. The first is dark red and black and dark green at the bottom. In the middle we put a shape like a banana and a star.

There is fighting and fires in Libya so we can't go to Libya so we have to wait for a long time.

There is lots of people fighting and there is lots of police killing with the guns. The police are good and they are good at killing those who are very naughty.

Source: Own elaboration

3 It is important to note here that Mustafe created this book during the time of the Libyan Uprising that was part of the wider Arab Spring. A fuller account of the impact that the Libyan Uprising had on the children and their peer interactions at school can be found in Barley & Merchant (2016).

By using this digital approach, the children, who were learning to mark-make and write at the time, were able to present a fuller narrative in their books than they had, up to this point, been able to communicate in literacy lessons using the medium of handwriting. As Booth & Rowsell (2007) argue digital literacy, can when implemented alongside non-digital approaches as in this research study, aid the production of handwriting skills in early literacy development and also encourage children who are struggling with the mechanics of handwriting. While written communication is widely accepted as being a key component of literacy development the domination of handwriting as the key medium for communicating in writing is being questioned due to its prioritisation of motor learning over developing composition and critical thinking skills leading some to ask if keyboarding should be taught before handwriting (Stevenson & Just, 2014). Putting this question to one side, it is currently widely accepted that handwriting and keyboarding are both important skills within a wider metaliteracy framework that supports a wider approach to literacy development removing what can be for some the stumbling block of motor learning that is part and parcel of handwriting (Booth & Rowsell, 2007; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011; Merchant, 2007; Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). Tasks, such as the "Where I am from..." research activity outlined above, remove this potential stumbling block and allow children to express themselves in a written form without constraining their expression or limiting their communication.

In a research context this approach facilitated the collection of in-depth data that potentially would not have been gained from a traditional written approach with this age group. In terms of wider literacy learning this type of activity can be used alongside more traditional approaches to aid the development of composition and critical thinking skills without the potential barrier of motor learning. Clearly, motor learning is also an important skill that remains part of literacy development, however, taking part in a variety of tasks to practice different aspects of literacy learning within a metaliterary framework allows development of all these literacy skills without the potential barriers that may be there for some children when testing multiple skills at the same time.

### **Collaborative Analysis**

In addition to conducting ongoing analysis throughout data collection (as highlighted above), I undertook a formal period of collaborative analysis at the end of the school year. In early May I felt that my data had reached saturation and so in line with advice from seasoned anthropologists who

recommend “that when the... culture you are studying begins to look normal, it is time to go home” (Barley, 1983, p. 153), I designed a collaborative analytical tool to enable the children to participate in a formal analytical stage. It is important to note here though that as there is a close relationship between data collection and analysis within ethnography this change in focus did not stop new pieces of data being produced.

Adapting the Early Years tool “Possible Lines of Development” (PLOD) plan (Arnold, 2010), I designed a “Participatory Analysis Tool” (PAT) to enable the children to get involved in this stage of my study. PATs are an accessible tool that allow a child to direct the analytical approach. The researcher and child review the data narratives together and discuss their significance. This allows the ethnographer to “check” if their interpretation of the data matches the child’s interpretation. This analysis can be done through the use of a range of mediums (e.g., writing, pictures, drawings, mark-making, etc.) that the child can choose. Although some guidance is given to help children participate fully, each child is encouraged to direct the activity as they think is best<sup>4</sup>. In the current project two analytical activities were used.

The first activity focused on collaboratively mapping children’s identities. Children were given a large piece of paper with two concentric circles on it (figure 4). The circles were not meant to be restrictive but were designed to give children a starting point.

To start the activity I asked the child to write their name in the inner circle. The next stage involved the child using words, drawings, pictures, mark-makings, etc.<sup>5</sup> to describe their identity or “who you are.” For example when initiating this activity I said to the child “when watching you play, I saw you...” or “when we made the digital book you said that...” I then asked the child to say if this was important to them. This process enabled me to check if I had interpreted the themes from my initial analysis in a way that was meaningful to the child or children involved. I recorded the conversation between myself and each child when creating the PATs and used this discussion to further check my interpretations of the data.

Inspired by Clark’s (2004) Mosaic Approach, the second analysis activity that I used with the PATs involved a ranking exercise relating to the activities that the children liked to do at school. I asked each child to pick their three favourite school activities and rank these in order of preference.

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4 While doing this activity with Deka her Mum, who had been in school that morning for another purpose, joined us for a short time and also contributed, at Deka’s request, to this stage of the analysis.

5 Children choose which medium they wanted to complete their PAT in. Therefore, some PATs contain lots of drawings while other children choose to make more use of pictures and photos.

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After writing their name in the inner circle, the child and I collaboratively filled in the second circle (or sometimes the whole sheet) with words, drawings, pictures, mark-makings, etc.<sup>6</sup> to describe the child's identity or "who you are." In doing this I said to the child "when watching you play, I saw you..." or "when we made the digital book you said that..." and asked the child to say if the theme that I had mentioned or the story that I had recited (from my fieldnotes) was important to them. By doing this I was able to check if the themes that I had pulled out of my initial stages of analysis had been interpreted in a way that was meaningful to the children who were involved in the activity or observational session (Le Compte, 1999). Our conversation was recorded during this activity and afterwards I listened back to the recording and further annotated the analysis sheet with the

6 Children choose which medium they wanted to complete their PAT in. Therefore, some PATs contain lots of drawings while other children choose to make more use of pictures and photos.

child's explanations of aspects of their identity that they wanted to be included in the sheet. This was done at a later time to ensure that everything the child had asked to be included was and that a particular aspect had not been accidentally missed off during the busyness of the activity. In a separate session these notes were then "checked" once again with the child to ensure that they were "correct."

Following on from activities outlined in Clark's (2004) "The Mosaic Approach," the second analysis activity focused on collaboratively analysing data relating to peer friendships. Using pictures of the different indoor and outdoor activity stations, I asked children to pick their three favourite activities at school. We ranked these in order of first, second and third. I then asked the children who they like to play with at each activity. After discussing these choices, I showed the child their PAT and after checking that they were happy with the identity data (and where necessary updating this information) we collaboratively filled in the remainder of the page with information about the child's peer friendships at school. At the end of this session, most children decided that they had completed their PATs, however two children asked if they could do some more work on these in a subsequent week. In these sessions we reviewed all of the material on their PATs before filling in the gaps (using drawings, pictures, mark-making, etc.) until they were satisfied that they had completed the activity. When each child had decided that they had finished this activity I took a photo of the child with their PAT to give to them. This symbolised that we had completed our collaborative analysis as well as the child's formal involvement in the study.

By using a range of mediums, both written and visual, to complete this analysis activity children were able to take part in a way that they felt comfortable with. As with the production of the "Where I am from..." digital book, discussed above, this activity was not constrained by the domination of handwriting as a medium of communication but rather a range of communication tools were employed to enable children's active participation in this research task. This approach can be analysed within a metaliteracy framework as it facilitated research participation while also allowing the development of a range of literacy skills without the potential barrier of motor learning that can be present for some children when communicating purely via handwriting (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011).

### **Reflecting on Written Research Outputs**

While undertaking these analysis activities the children started to ask what I would do with their data after we had finished analysing it and who would then read it.

I explained to them that I would write a book for my university teachers (i.e., my PhD thesis) and that I would return to the school the next year (when the children were in Year 1 [5-6 years old]) with a book summarising my research findings for the class. When I did this during the next school year the children then asked who I would talk to next about them. I told them about the research conferences that I was planning to go to and who would likely attend these. At a later date I went to the school with a PowerPoint presentation and showed them how I would present their stories at a conference. I also told the class that I was writing another book (Barley, 2014) and that once it had been published, I would come back to the class with a copy for them to keep. The children were surprised at how long this publication process would take. I gave the class a copy of this book as I started my third phase of fieldwork when the children were in Year 4 (8-9 years old). The children were interested to find their stories in this published book as well as their drawings that had been included both inside and on the front cover.

At break time on the same day some of the children came over to me to talk further about my longitudinal study demonstrating an ability to reflect on the research data that was collected while they were in the Reception class and which formed the stories that were presented in the published book:

I follow the children outside to the playground at break time. Kareem (8 years old) runs up to me shouting "Do you remember me?." "Yes," I reply smiling. "When we were in Reception you asked us what we wanted to be when we were older," he tells me breathlessly, "I've changed my mind! Now I want to be a famous footballer. Will you write about that?" I tell him that I will (Fieldnote Extract: Year 4-6 Playground, cited in Albon & Barley, 2018).

This fieldnote extract reveals that Kareem has not only recalled a research conversation from four years earlier but that he has also reflected on what was discussed at the time and shown that he understands that identity is a fluid concept. As Geneshi & Dyson (2009) argue, this example "highlights that thinking about children's language and literacy development should be viewed as dialogic... where children are supported to engage with written texts as an ongoing process that allows for multiple interpretations" (Albon & Barley, 2018, p. 22).

Allowing children to engage with research outputs as part of an ongoing longitudinal study also helped to facilitate ongoing consent during subsequent fieldwork stages:

It starts to rain heavily just before the end of break time so we quickly go back inside. As we get to the classroom Fariido (8 years old) comes up to me as I finish writing up some fieldnotes and asks me “Do you write everything you see?” “Yes” I reply restating that I am interested in finding out about who the children in the class are and who they are friends with. “What will you do with it?” Fariido enquires. “I will write a book, like after Reception,” I tell her. “Is it OK if I write about you in my book?” “Yes!” she says excitedly, “I’m going to be in Ruth’s next book!” she tells Daud (8 years old), who is standing nearby. Daud asks me, “will I be in it too? Can I read it?” “Yes,” I tell him, “I will come back next year and tell you what I’m writing about and then bring you the book when it’s finished.” “How long will it take?” Daud asks. I explain to him the process of writing up fieldnotes, finding a publisher and writing a book draft and then a final version. Daud is surprised at the length of time involved (Fieldnote extract: Year 4 classroom, cited in Albon & Barley, 2018).

As well as facilitating ongoing informed consent, sharing written research outputs with children can also facilitate learning on the nature of writing as a dialogic process where writing is a work in progress that needs to be revised based on feedback from others (Albon & Barley, 2018). Statutory requirements at Key Stage 2<sup>7</sup> (KS2) of the National Curriculum for England and Wales, states that children should be able to plan, draft, edit and evaluate their own and others’ writing by the end of their primary school education at the age of 11 (Department for Education, 2014). The associated guidance further clarifies this requirement by stating that children should understand the different stages involved in producing a final written output including how writing can be adapted for different audiences. The research conversations outlined in this section allowed children in the class to reflect on different ways of communicating research findings to different audiences as well as the process involved in publishing a book consolidating literacy learning as laid out by the statutory requirements of the National Curriculum in England and Wales. As the children were in Year 4 at the time of these research conversations, and therefore in the first half of their KS2 curriculum, these conversations and reflections were started well in advance of the Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) that all children are required to take near the end of their final year in primary school in England and Wales (Year 6) to assess their learning in all areas of the National Curriculum.

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7 Key Stage 2 in England and Wales runs from Years 3-6 when children are typically between the ages of 7 and 11 years old.



Some of the children in the class directly related the research publication process that I had described to their own process of writing in school providing, albeit unintentionally, opportunities for further literacy learning. For example, at other times during this third stage of fieldwork, Daud compared the feedback that he got from his teacher in literacy lessons to the publication process that I had described to him in relation to publishing my book while also noting that the process in school was a lot quicker!

### **Collaboration Enriching the Research Process**

Each day of this study I learnt from the children both in terms of their identity negotiations and also their capacity to fully participate in a research process. While some authors, such as Helseth & Slettebo (2004), question if children have the capacity to consent to participate in research projects (or if they are only able to give their assent), undertaking a collaborative approach in the current study has taught me that children are indeed capable of not only consenting to take part in research but also be involved in the design of research activities and processes of data collection and analysis. This not only enriched the research process but also the richness of the data that was collected. Undertaking this approach has taught me that a child's capacity to take part in research should not be judged on age but rather on a child's experience and confidence, as well as the type of research that is being conducted and the researcher's expertise in actively working collaboratively with participants.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

By drawing on the experience of involving children in the research process this paper reflects on the involvement of children as active research participants. Throughout this study children were considered as active research participants, giving them the "power" to influence the emergent nature of the research process. They were collaboratively involved in designing research activities as well as collecting and analysing research data. As Flewitt (2005) advocates, sharing key decisions in the project's design and interpretation in this way helps to reduce power differentials between participants and the researcher. This is particularly important when working with children due to dominant discourses about the nature of childhood, which hold that children are subordinate to adults within society. Due to these discourses when researchers ask children to tell them something that they do not know, this may be the first time that the child has found themselves in a situation where they have been asked to "teach" an adult. These

dominant discourses also advocate that children should try to please adults. This adds an extra layer of complexity in gaining access to children's views.

While literacy learning was evident in the research activities described above it was important to maintain a distinction between formal school learning and research activities to ensure that children were able to give their informed consent to participate in the study. This paper, consequently, does not argue that research in a school context should form the same format as school lessons but rather that research activities can also provide an opportunity for learning that consolidates learning within the school.

Gaining this heightened level of informed consent allows the researcher to reflect on the ethical dimensions of collaborative research with children and in doing so further dismantle power dynamics between child participants and an adult researcher. In doing so, the data that is collected is enriched allowing a deeper insight into the phenomenon that is being studied. This in turn allows a greater insight into educational contexts in relation to the specific area that is under scrutiny.

Enabling children to dialogue with research processes and research outputs (whether verbal or written) not only enables a heightened level of informed consent to be negotiated in later stages of a study but also gives children the opportunity to understand the whole research process and to engage with literacy in a way that formal education contexts may not be able to easily facilitate.

### About the author

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