

Exploring Playful Participatory Research with Children in School Age Care

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Abstract: Participatory research methods that focus on children's right to form and express views about research topics have grown in popularity in recent decades. It is less common for play to have a central role in participatory research. This article provides an account of a small, participatory research project conducted in a School Age Care setting in Melbourne, Australia where play had a more central role in the method. The decision to embed the research in a play-based setting contributed to a fluid, playful research environment where play and work became entangled in complex ways. This article draws on poststructural theories to make sense of what happened during the research. It contemplates whether there is a place for playful research in extended education settings and if there are any benefits.

Keywords: Extended education, school age care, participatory research, play, Foucault

Introduction

Participatory research methods with children have grown in popularity in recent decades (Gallagher, 2008). Participatory methods involve children in research by making available roles to them as informers, data collectors and sometimes designers and analysers, roles that have traditionally been occupied by adults (Clark & Moss, 2001; Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011). Rationales for participatory research frequently draw upon Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that children have a right to form and express a view, a right that extends to having a voice in research (Alderson, 2008). Participatory research can also be informed by an emancipatory desire to correct a historical inequity, which commonly positions children as the objects of study by adults (Gallagher, 2008; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

Participatory researchers have applied a variety of approaches in extended education. Some researchers invite children to contribute their views via conversation (Klerfelt & Haglund, 2015), whereas others use visual media such as photography, map-making, slide shows, drawing and collage to give children choice over how they express their views (Author, 2020; Elvstrand & Närvänen, 2016; Smith & Barker, 2000). Participatory methods are a good philosophical match with extended education settings in cultures such as Sweden where children's civic participation has greater cultural acceptance (Elvstrand & Lago, 2019; Haglund, 2015) or Australia where it is supported by government policy (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). Less common in participatory methods is attention to play. Whilst researchers might sometimes adopt methods they hope children will find fun, play is rarely employed as a means of investigation.

This article investigates one participatory research project conducted with a small group of children in their first year of primary school at a School Age Care (SAC) program in

Melbourne, Australia. SAC is an important and under-researched extended education setting that provides care, leisure and education for children in the hours outside school (Author, 2020; Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). In 2017, approximately 364,000 Australian children aged 5 to 12 years attended SAC (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Depending on operating hours, children can spend up to 5 hours per day in SAC making it a significant site of play and learning.

In this project, play was a central feature of the research method. The research activities were embedded in a play-based SAC setting, presenting the research as one of several play options available to children. As the research progressed, it became increasingly playful, disrupting many of the conventions traditionally associated with research. This article presents a poststructural analysis of two vignettes from the conduct of the research. The analysis explores an approach where the work-like activities of research and children's play became entangled and intersecting. This playful approach to participatory research had multiple implications for a range of matters relating to assent processes, terminologies and distinctions between research and play. This purpose of this article is to consider possible connections between work and play during research with children and whether there is benefit in playful, participatory research methods, particularly in play-based extended education and early childhood settings.

Play and Playfulness in Research with Children

Play is synonymous with childhood and considered the primary activity that children engage in during free time (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Its centrality in children's lives is reflected by it being accorded the status of a 'right' in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). Play is also fundamental to extended education curriculum in Australia and other locations such as Sweden (Author, 2019; Bae, 2019). Despite its perceived importance, play is not often considered in research methods with children.

Play is discussed in research literature in a variety of ways. One common theme is that research activities can be successful if children consider them "fun" (Punch, 2002b). Enjoyable research activities are believed to ease the labour of participating in research (Punch, 2002a) or make it more desirable to children (Punch, 2002b). Researchers commonly choose activities like photography, drawing and puppetry that they hope children will find fun. Whilst fun and enjoyment are considered characteristic of children's play, it is debatable whether fun research activities possess other elements of play, such as being freely chosen, controlled by children or intrinsically motivated (Lester & Russell, 2014; Eberle, 2010). Also, whilst some activities assumed to be fun, they may not always succeed. Play is a slippery concept to define and what is considered fun can differ across individuals (Smith, 2009).

Fewer researchers adopt methods that aspire to incorporate play beyond providing fun activities. Koller and San Juan (2015) adopt 'play-based' interviewing using dramatic play with dolls to facilitate interviews. The method has other play-like characteristics, in that it is imaginative, and children could choose activities. In another study, Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019) add other dimensions of play, using arts-based activities that are em-