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Exploring playful participatory research with children in school age care

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Exploring Playful Participatory Research with Children in School Age Care

Bruce Hurst

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 (Hurst, 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 (Hurst, 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 (Hurst, 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-

bedded in a play-based, early childhood setting. They presented research activities as one of the play options available to children, who moved freely between options.

Research approaches such as those used by Koller and San Juan (2015) and Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019) attend to the right to play in ways that go beyond providing activities that are simply fun. They offer possibilities for researchers who seek a more central role for play in research approaches. The approach adopted in this study was most like that used by Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019) whose research resonated with my own experiences in this project, which I will explore in more depth later in this paper.

Method

This was a qualitative research project conducted at a SAC setting in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne Australia. Ethics approval was granted by The University of Melbourne and approval to undertake research in SAC was received by the Victorian Government. The participants were a group of 7 children aged 5 to 6 years in their first year of school. To assist with anonymity, participants given pseudonyms.

The project was conceived as a children's research 'advisory group', based on a methodology proposed by Lundy, McEvoy and Byrne (2011) who argue that with support, young children are capable of participating in the development of research projects and interpretation of data. The participants in this study were invited to contribute to the development of an online survey for SAC practitioners and the subsequent analysis of the survey data. The survey aimed to provide insights into practitioners' views about programming for young children.

The survey was developed in two phases. The first phase involved four consultation methods to gain an insight into the participants' views about providing SAC. The names of the consultation activities were negotiated with the children and discussed later in the article. The first activity was 'drawing research' where children could draw pictures of things both in and out of SAC that were important to them (Clark & Moss, 2001). The second activity, photo elicitation or 'photo research' was similar in that children were asked to photograph elements of SAC they considered important (Clark & Moss, 2001). A digital camera was used on the basis that children were familiar with the technology and could work independently (Yamada-Rice, 2017). Visual methods support children to form their ideas about research questions and are well suited to young children who might lack confidence in verbal communication (Clark & Moss, 2001; Yamada-Rice, 2017). The third activity was 'box research', where I asked children to rank photographs I had taken of play spaces and resources from their SAC. I also included images of other activities, such as digital play, that were not available at the research site but common in other SAC settings. Children could rank photographs as 'like', 'dislike' or 'unsure' (Punch, 2002a). There was also 'talking research' or interviews, which typically occurred after one of the first three activities, where I invited children to talk about their drawing, photograph or rankings. This combination of methods acknowledged that children communicate in a variety of ways and can choose how they communicate (Clark & Moss, 2001; MacNaughton & Smith, 2009).

After the consultations, the children's data was used to produce a draft survey. In the second phase, I sought participants' feedback on the draft survey through semi-structured interviews, which enabled me to be open to, and explore, unexpected views about the survey questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants could give feedback individually, pairs or groups.

Play was an important element of the research, in terms of how it was located and presented. Like Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019), each day I sat at a designated 'research table' with one consultation activity chosen for that day. Activities were co-located in the SAC space alongside the participants' normal SAC play experiences so that participants could move easily between the two. This contrasted with previous projects I have done where interviews were conducted away from the distraction of play spaces (Hurst, 2015, 2020). Being located in the program space meant that non participating children from sometimes joined in research activities although they contributed no data.

Play was also important with respect to gaining participants' assent, which was sought for all research activities. Some participants completed a children's assent form designed for the project. Others instead were asked for verbal assent at the beginning of each consultation activity, describing the activity to them, asking if I could keep their art works, record our conversation, and remind them of how the data would be used. These conversations about assent were audio recorded. Participants could choose at any time to leave research and return to play, which is one way that children withdraw consent (Smith & Coady, 2019). Interpreting the decision to play in preference to research as withdrawal of assent seems critical in research in play-based extended education settings like SAC.

In addition to the consultation data, ethnographic field notes were recorded in a diary. Ethnography is suited to understanding children's participation as capable social actors in social settings (James, 2001). Field notes often focused on what felt like significant moments where children were active in shaping and re-shaping the method and that captured the essence of how this research was conducted (Fujii, 2015; James, 2001). The long-term nature of ethnography is also well suited to capturing the indvidualised exercises of power that are assumed in a poststructural theorisation presented in this paper (Britzman, 2002; Christensen, 2004).

The analysis in this paper explores data from the first phase of the research, that being the four consultation activities conducted with children to develop a draft survey.

Theorising Poststructurally About Playful Research with Children

As this project unfolded, I became interested in the role of play in the research. Whilst I had positioned research activities alongside play, I still envisaged that the two would be distinct from each other. I had anticipated that play's primary role was as an alternative to research and a way to withdraw assent (Smith & Coady, 2019). However, one factor I encountered was that normal program activity was visible, noisy and exciting, and often drew participants away from the research. What resulted was a fluid, dynamic research environment with children moving frequently between play spaces and often very playful consultation activities, blurring distinctions between the two.

As the project progressed, I was trying to make sense theoretically of what the participants and I were experiencing. How might two seemingly distinct activities intermingle in this way and why did it feel discomforting? In Western, modernist knowledge systems, play and work are often positioned as distinct and dichotomous (Cannella, 2008: Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Work, including research, is seen as the business of adults, purposeful and productive. Play is instead defined by its lack of these qualities, something that is the business of children, frivolous and non-productive (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). The work/play binary is a complex social production emerging from language, romantic and developmental theories of childhood, and social practices that divide between work and leisure and adulthood and childhood (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). However, binaries such as work and play are social constructions that mask their lived complexities (Derrida, 1997). Play and work are not opposite or separate. Adults also participate in play (Cannella, 2008; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Play is also recognised as a site of learning for young children, positioning it both as purposeful and educational rather than trivial (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Children's play is not restricted just to designated spaces. Children can find play opportunities in the most work-like spaces (Lester & Russell, 2014). This unsettling of binary understandings of work and play allows me to contemplate that as experienced in this project, play and work/research are not always opposite and separate.

Rojek (1995) draws on Foucault's theories of power and knowledge to trouble the work/play binary further. Rojek asserts that the freedom considered characteristic of leisure and play is compromised by identity work. Leisure and play can rarely ever be free because subjects engage in constant self-surveillance and questioning, constructing their identities in relation to dominant social norms. Am I wearing the right clothes and how do I look? Is this activity suitably for my age or gender? Am I being environmentally or socially responsible? Should I be at work instead of play? Children's play can also be made less free by the work of self-monitoring against social norms related to gender, social class and age (Hurst, 2020). Children's play in SAC is also entangled with acts of waiting and emotional labour (Hurst, 2019). Rojek's (1995) analysis raises the possibility that play and work are never opposite, and that play is unavoidably infused with work-like elements. Power is distributed throughout societies and individual subjects are never free of self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Consequently, identity work also takes place not just during play but during all activities, including research.

The analysis that follows explores two anecdotes from the first, consultation phase of the research. Each of these anecdotes were moments where distinctions between research and play seemed entangled. The analysis draws on poststructural theories relating to binary oppositions and Foucault's theories of power/knowledge to provide an understanding of how play and work/research were experienced as this research unfolded. I aim to contemplate that participatory research with children, a work-like activity, can also have playful elements, and that this play does not have to be frivolous or problematic but can have a meaningful role in research methods and the production of knowledge about extended education.

Findings

Entangling research and play during 'photo research'

I learned early in this project that using this approach, research and play could not be separated. The consultation activities were in close proximity to regular SAC play experiences, and children were supported to move freely between the two.

One occasion where I experienced the fluid, entangled relationship between research and play was during a 'photo research' session with Max Speed, a 6-year-old who attends SAC two days a week. I was looking forward to doing photo research with Max. He was often more willing than other participants to engage in research. Research with Max felt comfortable and aligned with my original expectations of what the research would be like. He followed instructions closely, enthusiastically talked about his photos and sometimes asked to repeat activities. Foucault's theories help me to understand the comfort I experienced researching with Max. When subjects align with norms they feel less visible which helps to maintain normative social categories (Foucault, 1977). The roles Max and I adopted felt recognisable as "objective researcher" and "knowable participant", historically dominant roles that are emblematic of enlightenment knowledge systems and research traditions (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Often practitioners would stand and observe when Max and I were working, watching the 'expert' researcher in action. In contrast, when researching with other children I worried that I looked like somebody who was 'just playing' and wondered how practitioners viewed that more playful iteration of researcher. My desire to be seen as more productive and recognisable as a researcher in these situations is an example of the identity work that subjects engage in to render play more work-like (Rojek, 1995).

Often during photo research with Max, other participants and non-participating children watched on, asking questions about the camera, offering opinions or if they could participate. Initially, I tried to resist the entry of others into the research space. It contradicted conventional approaches to interviewing that prefer quiet, uninterrupted spaces where participants can form views without influence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Instead, photo research sometimes functioned like a focus group with multiple voices and perspectives. The input of others does not invalidate the data produced during research. It instead means that Max's views may have been formed differently than if he had been isolated during interviewing.

Opening research activities to others had implications for how participants provided assent to participate. Observing Max's research seemed to help some participants develop a clearer understanding of research tasks before deciding whether to participate. Three participants asked to conduct research after having observed Max or others. This approach to assent is supported by (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012) who suggest that co-construction by researcher and participant is a valuable way for children to learn about research methods. It is unlikely this approach to assent would work in the same way without the free movement between research and play spaces.

One afternoon I was doing photo research with Max and I began interviewing him about his first photograph. Just as we commenced, Isabel aged 5 years entered the space.

Isabel. Bruce the animal show's on today.
Bruce. I'll be there in 5 minutes is that okay?
Isabel. 3 minutes!
Bruce. 5 minutes because I'm talking to Max Speed, we're doing photographs today.

Five minutes later Isabel called out.

Isabel. 'Bruce' your time is up. Your time is up….The baby lions.

Isabel spent most afternoons in what children and practitioners called 'Steiner', a space with wooden construction materials, plastic zoo animals and dinosaurs. Isabel often led play in Steiner, directing other children to create enclosures for animals, design animal 'shows', and provide pre and post-natal care for baby animals. In this engagement, Isabel engages in negotiation, asking me to end research with Max and relocate to Steiner. Isabel aligns with the heteronormative women's role of 'carer' (Walkerdine, 1990), insisting that I help care for the baby lions and join the play.

In this vignette, play and research intersected and overlapped in multiple ways. Isabel's playful entries drew my attention away from Max, disrupted the formal feel of the research and making it less work-like. Whilst I physically remained in photo research, I became more connected to Steiner through conversations held with Isabel and looking across the room to happenings in the animal show. I also engaged in self-monitoring, silently reminding myself that a 'good' researcher would be solely focused on Max. It is an example of how, in this project, play and research were never opposite or separate. My work was made more playful by engaging with Isabel's interventions. Her play was rendered more laboured by the work of drawing me into the space. Max instead worked to align himself with the role of knowable research participant.

Isabel's actions can also be understood as a resistance to the work-dominated role I assumed with Max. Resistances are one way individuals construct social categories and knowledge (Foucault, 1980). I experienced many other forms of resistance. LaLa, a 6-year-old, silently avoided me if she didn't want to research. Emily, a 5-year-old, stopped answering my questions if she wanted to return to play. There were also the Baby Dragons, a role that Emily and Isabel sometimes assumed during play. Baby Dragons were loud and disruptive, communicating only in 'baby dragon' language. Sometimes when I invited Emily and Isabel to research, they transformed into Baby Dragons, making conversations about research difficult. Expressing a desire to play is one way children withdraw assent (Smith & Coady, 2019). Drawing on Foucault, resistances are multiple and shift across individuals and contexts (MacNaughton, 2005). Seeing resistances as multiple allows researchers to be attuned to the multiple ways children withdraw consent.

Negotiating research terminologies

This play-based approach also had implications for how the research was defined and spoken of. Although I had endeavoured to take a more playful approach to the research, I still found myself slipping into binary constructions of play and research with my thinking, speech and actions. I privileged more formal activities with participants like Max because they felt more productive and purposeful. These ways of working also aligned with my own normative understandings about what research 'should' look like (Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson, 2019). This influenced how I categorised and responded to other children's participation. I sometimes caught myself delaying engagement with participants who sought more playful interaction. Knowledge is formed through localised exercises of power around dominant discourses (Foucault, 1980). Each interaction where I enacted a preference for more work-like

forms of research, I was engaged in the production of knowledge that work/research is more adult, serious, productive and valuable than play, something that is child-like, frivolous and non-productive (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

One such moment significantly changed the terminology the children and I used to speak about research. Most days, two 6-year-old boys, Poop and Toilet would enter research activities and ask me to draw with them, something I had done early in the project to develop rapport. Initially I regarded most of this drawing as "just play", having little value as a means of producing useful data. Once data collection commenced, I was less likely to accept invitations to draw, and told Poop and Toilet that I needed to research. In response to my rejections, Poop and Toilet started referring to our drawing as "drawing research". Their reframing of drawing as research was an application of power that compelled me to question my understandings of what constituted research and an example of what Foucault (2019, p. 298) terms "the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others". By tagging drawing as 'drawing research' Poop and Toilet disrupted it's binary positioning as a low status activity. I began adopting the practice and tagged other activities as "research". Photo elicitation became known as "photo research", the ranking activity as "box research" and interviews as "talking research". Adopting this terminology seemed to increase participation in research activities. Participants like Isabel and Emily who were reluctant to participate in "interviews" were more open to engage in "talking research".

The co-constructed terminology had multiple effects. It compelled me to confront the binary conception of research and play that I entered the project with and the belief that only "purposeful" questioning would yield useful data. I opened myself to Poop and Toilet's view that playful activities can be forms of research and therefore sources of useful data. Foucault's theories allow contemplation that truth can be multiple (MacNaughton, 2005) and therefore understandings about what are "good" ways to research with children can also be multiple. By stepping outside the work/play binary, I was able to consider that there can also be playful forms of research including drawing. This resulted in more time spent drawing and a greater sense of comfort researching this way. I recognised that research took multiple forms, engaging differently with each child and in ways that varied across days, activities and within activities. Interactions with Max were usually longer, felt more "serious" and focused on the day's planned activity. With Isabel, Poop and Toilet, interactions were usually more playful, spontaneous and less serious. Each participant defined research differently. Whilst Poop and Toilet regarded drawing as research, Max could be resentful of my engagement in more playful activities. Becoming open to multiple forms of research/play was important methodologically. Universalised ways of working with children can be inequitable, marginalising those outside the mainstream (MacNaughton, 2005). Early in this project, participants like Poop, Toilet and Isabel contributed little data because they did not enjoy the work-like feel of the activities. As I adopted more playful forms of research, these participants engaged more actively.

In their play-based research, Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019) describe a similar transformation, describing how they let go of the desire to maintain control over the conduct of research. In letting go, they propose that researchers open themselves up to the "small acts of listening" that can emerge during playful research with children (p. 20). Accepting Poop and Toilet's re-framing of drawing was my own moment of letting go. I realised that conversations during drawing research or Steiner could provide valuable insights into participants' views. For me, it also meant letting go of the research/play binary and a con-

ception that saw formal, work-like research activities as the only source of useful data. Letting go enabled me to find value in all my interactions. Conversations during playful research produced occasional nuggets of insight. Whilst less frequent than those produced when asking more scripted questions, they were very important in the development of the survey. The small acts of listening proposed by Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019) left me more open to the children's concerns rather than my own preoccupations leading to encounters with data that I do not think would have emerged from more conventional participatory approaches. Listening to the participants during play felt different to the more formal interviews I conducted with Max and in other projects. The role seemed closer to that of companion or what the pre-school participants in Myers' (2019, p. 25) study call "being (with us)". I do not want to romanticise this research as something "better". The work was slow, required patience and relaxed timelines. Playful research seems to demand letting go of timelines and welcoming the suspension of time that accompanies children's play (Lester & Russell, 2014).

Conclusion

This was a small, qualitative research project conducted at a single Australian SAC setting. Consequently, the findings are limited to the setting and participants. Children's play was important in the method. The research activities were presented to children as one of the activity choices available to them, therefore embedding them in the play-based curriculum structure. Children exercising their right to play whenever they wished was also the primary means by which children would withdraw assent. Despite embracing the right to play, I had hoped that children would mostly choose to participate in research when presented with the opportunity. What instead occurred was that most participants chose to play rather than research. My initial response was to focus my attention on the participants most eager to research and spend less time with those who preferred to play.

Privileging children who chose to research reinforced dominant discourses that position research, a work-like, adult-dominated institution as more valuable, binary opposite of play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), something that ran counter to my original aspirations. As this project progressed, I came instead to view play and research as not entirely distinct and separate but instead as intersecting and mingling in complex and multiple ways. Once embedded in the play-based structure, participants moved freely between research and other play experiences. Nobody was ever entirely in play or in research. Some children who weren't research participants viewed me as an object of play and placed themselves in and out of the research, bringing a playful element to research activities. Despite my efforts, my attention was often in multiple places. When researching, I found myself drawn to playful activity in other parts of the room. When involved in more playful forms of research, I engaged in self-monitoring about whether I needed to appear more like a conventional researcher, something that added labour to the play (Rojek, 1995). I also added other work-like elements to everybody's play. When in Steiner or doing drawing research, I was constantly on alert for useful data, or opportunities to question participants about their views. Poststructural theories and their attention to fluidity and multiplicity allow me to recognise that binary opposites like research/play are social fictions and the productions of language (Derrida, 1977). This re-

search suggests that when participatory research with children is embedded in play-based extended education settings, that playful iterations of research are inevitable.

This playful approach had several methodological implications. Embracing drawing and other forms of play as valid types of research resulted in more participants engaging in the project, therefore contributing a wider range of views. Participants' data emerging from playful research often differed from that provided in more formal activities. One of the perceived values of participatory research is that children's voices disrupt adult-centric views of the world. The surprising and unexpected were more common during playful research engagements, at times unsettling my own understandings of the research setting.

However, this playful approach was not without complications. Researching embedded in a play-based program meant that working without distractions was almost impossible. Non-participants entered research spaces, commenting on activities, or contributing to interviews. This created a focus group like feel in interviews. Rather than view this as a shortcoming, it should be seen as a feature of the approach, where child participants and researcher co-construct knowledge with a shifting cast of others. This approach was also very useful in that children were able to observe research activities in action which helped them form a view about whether to participate.

This research also has implications for the consultation work practitioners do in SAC and play-based extended education settings as part of their pedagogical planning (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). This is commonly seen as the work of adults and separate from, albeit about, children's play. Consultation work often bears the hallmark of Western research traditions where "objective" practitioners collect observations, artefacts and data from discussions with children (Cannella, 2008). Consultations with children can have a work-like feel, often taking the forms like group meetings. If, as suggested by Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, and Robinson (2019), practitioners also "let go" of work-like documentation processes, it might open them to more playful forms of consultation with children. As discovered in this research, more playful consultation might be more engaging for children and produce a wider range of views with the potential to transform SAC provision.

There is little research exploring playful participatory research, the possibilities it creates and possible benefits. Consequently, there is a need for more investigation into playful research approaches, particularly in play-based extended education settings. Playful acts by children need not be seen as a threat to quality research and have the potential to provide other ways of understanding children's perspectives on extended education.

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