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Research With Young Children: Some Ethical Considerations

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This paper explores elements of an ethnographic case study of the peer group 'realities' of young children and seeks to illuminate a number of ethical difficulties concerning responsibility and trust in relation to my position as researcher of young children within a school setting. In this position, I have experienced a tension between trying to capture the 'natural' social setting of peer group interactions through conducting 'affinity' group discussions with a small group of young children and being a 'responsible' adult in the company of these children within the overarching disciplinary framework of the school. In this regard, I felt conflicted between my research intention and my researcher responsibilities. I intended to attempt to closely reflect the social environment and interactions of a boy's peer group. In this sense, I hoped to intervene within this environment as little as possible. However, on a number of occasions, the peer group involved in the study interacted in ways 'problematic' to its members. Thus, despite my intention to be as non-interventionist as I could, there were numerous situations where my position as responsible researcher of young children compelled me to intervene.

Further to this, upon reflection I came to recognise that my intervention strategies were inconsistent. While sifting back through the hours of transcript data from the boys' affinity group discussion sessions, I became increasingly aware that I intervened to prevent threats to the boys' physical safety, but not to threats to their emotional safety. In this regard, my research concerns in exploring language, power and the production of meaning were implicated in how I intervened with the children and could be construed as compromising the emotional safety of the group. Additionally, there were times when I felt my intervention (or lack thereof) regarding the protection of the boys' emotional safety was perceived by their class teacher and a parent as inadequate. The following discussion considers this conflict between research intention and researcher intervention with reference to a narrativised incident of emotional bullying from the study.

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Research and Children

Concerns with the ethical and moral implications of researching children have been widely discussed (Amos Hatch, 1995; Hood, Kelley & Mayall, 1996; Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke & Craig, 1996; Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998). These concerns have been related to the appropriateness and desirability of involving children directly in research, in terms of their competence and vulnerability as research subjects (Mahon et al, 1996). Based on adultist assumptions, the view of children as incompetent and in need of protection and control has underpinned much research involving children (Hood et al, 1996; Matthews et al, 1998). In this regard, the research focus governed by adult interests has resulted in children being perceived as 'either at the mercy of or posing risk to adult social worlds' (Hood et al, 1996, p. 118). To these ends, children's own interests, experiences and knowledge have often been excluded from the research enterprise (Hood et al, 1996) because they have been perceived as poor informants, not able to fully understand 'many of the issues which confront their daily lives' (Matthews et al, 1998, p. 314).

While the validity and accuracy of children's responses have been questioned in conjunction with debate over the issue of protecting children from researcher exploitation in the form of intrusive or potentially distressing questioning, there is now strong consensus that 'children's views can and ought to be taken seriously' (Mahon et al, 1996, p. 146). There is also strong consensus on the significance for researchers to consider particular ethical and moral issues when working with children, with concern for the issue of researcher intention and the notion of research *with* or *for* children, rather than *on* children (Amos Hatch, 1995; Hood et al, 1996; Mahon et al, 1996; Matthews et al, 1998).

In this regard, ethical questions concerning researcher intention and justification such as 'Why am I doing this study?', 'What is my relationship to the participants?', 'Who benefits from this study?', 'Who may be at risk in the contexts I am studying?' and 'Should I intervene on behalf of those at risk?' are seen as critical (Amos Hatch, 1995, p. 221). Hood et al (1996, p. 119) assert that the justification for the research - for collecting the data - should be 'to help make children heard'. Such self-reflexivity to the ends of 'making children heard' positions children as actors in their own right with valid opinions and views about their everyday worlds (Matthews et al, 1998). Through self-reflexive participation and engagement alongside children within the research process, researchers can understand children and childhood from the perspective of children (Hood et al, 1996).

Intervention

The work of Amos Hatch (1995) on peer group behaviour in kindergarten raises critical concerns about the conflict between research intention and researcher intervention. Resonating strongly with my own research story, he details his non-intervention as a witness to a young boy's stigmatisation by his peers and the resulting critique from a colleague: 'If you knew Lester was being stigmatised by his classmates, why didn't you do something to intervene on his behalf?' He describes a discomfort in recognising the voyeuristic aspect of his work in terms of identifying

and reflecting on his feelings of 'exhilaration' at the time: 'I knew I was getting 'good data'' (1995, p. 217). He explains that this voyeurism, which advanced the 'integrity' of his research, was partly responsible for his lack of intervention. He notes the paradoxical nature of this research conflict; the tension between raising awareness through reporting on risky or distressing situations without intervening, and substantially varying reports through intervening 'when we see those we are studying at risk' (Amos Hatch, 1995, p. 218).

I have also experienced discomfort with the voyeuristic element within my own research. Like Amos Hatch, colleagues have questioned my non-intervention in a situation concerning distress to a young child. After presenting aspects of my data detailing particular social interactions at an Australian conference for research in education and at a university research forum the following year, on both occasions I was criticised for not intervening to prevent what one person described as 'a clear case of bullying'.

The study

The study at the focus of this paper was designed to interrogate peer group 'meanings' through exploring dominant understandings of masculinities. The study adopted the principles of ethnography within the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism, drawing on feminist readings and interpretations of the concepts of subjectification through language and discourse. The key focus was directed towards examining the role of power and language in the collective production of what constitutes schoolboy 'realities' and knowledges, and the processes of how boys subjectify and are subjectified through power relations embedded in social interactions. The social beliefs, practices and emotional investments underpinning these dominant forms of masculinity, which act to govern boys' behaviour and condition and limit boys' understandings of masculinity, were of key importance to this investigation.

Intensive affinity group sessions were conducted with a group of young males between the ages of six and eight years. These 'affinity' group sessions occurred twice per week over a six-month period and were intended to reflect, as closely as possible, the peer group 'realities' of this group of friends. With the participants' ages and the group context in mind, a variety of motivational prompts were used to foreground the dynamics of group interaction and to organically explore the dominant and collective understandings of masculinities. In conjunction with activities such as drawing and photography, these prompts stimulated group discussion and included commentary on a range of issues of interest to the particular group, such as favourite toys, sports, games and people.

The following narrative (re)presents data from the second affinity group session, six weeks after my first contact with the boys.

‘Your Truck Sucks’

The boys’ affinity group session *Favourite Toys* on the 3rd of August was the second time we had met as a group. After the first calamitous session, during which the overexcited boys continually talked and yelled over one another with little regard for anything anybody else had to say, I decided to introduce some ‘behavioural guidelines’ for use during the subsequent sessions. My efforts in the initial four-week observation period, to develop a ‘non-judgemental’ relationship of confidence and trust with the boys, had resulted in my deliberate positioning as having little authority. Following this however, my efforts to structure the first session to form any sort of semblance were futile. While the lack of authority with which the boys positioned me seemed to support an openness and freeness in their talk, I was concerned about my responsibility for the children’s safety. In particular, I feared that the boys’ disorderly behaviour, in the form of the occasional ‘friendly’ shove and play fight, would pose a threat to their physical safety.

As a direct response to this, at the beginning of the second session I included the boys in the planning of some simple guidelines for behaviour. We decided to pass a ‘speaking object’ (highlighter pen) around the group to indicate who could and could not speak at a given time. We also decided that all of us were to remain seated in our own places during the session. The reinforcement of these guidelines was to be through a warning system - the boys were to be given three warnings, after which they would be sent back to class. I saw the use and enforcement of these guidelines as significant in creating a ‘safe’ and supportive environment, intended to give each boy an opportunity to talk and be heard.

The boys had eagerly anticipated this second session and were looking forward to sharing their favourite toys.

When our afternoon sharing time finally arrived, the boys excitedly grabbed their toys and bounded down the corridor to the school’s conference room, assembling themselves around the small table in the middle of the room. Beginning the session, Adam had the other boys transfixed with a few stories about boxing.

> ‘I have won two silver medals, five gold medals. I’ve won two championship belts an’ I’ve had 57 nose bleeds an’ I am de champion of de world’, he began in a commanding voice …
>
> ‘Um an’ if you get knocked out’, he added, ‘your back’s gonna cane like ‘ell ‘cause um de whole floor’s made out of cement an’ um, I’ve got knocked out an’ I’m out of boxing this Thursday an’ second Saturday because I got a knee injury’, he remarked, casually rubbing his knee. ‘You have to have special boxing gloves’, he continued to his attentive audience, ‘an’ dere’s rapid punches um a abicarda punch um one, two, knockout and a rhino’, he explained.
>
> ‘That would hurt!’ exclaimed Justin in wide-eyed response to Adam’s description of being knocked out on a cement floor. ‘Can you do a rhino punch for us?’ Matthew asked Adam eagerly.
>
> ‘I think that’s a really good career, like doing boxing’, Ravi confirmed in admiration. …

On a few occasions during the time fleetingly paid to the other boys' toys - Ravi's 'torch light gun', Matthew's Batmobile, and Jack's descriptions of his 'Waspinator' Beast War play - Adam jumped up and asked if he could demonstrate some of his 'moves'. …

'De easiest way t'knock out their tooth', he explained, while holding Ravi's head in a headlock, 'is ta go like dat an' then you smash de jaw line'. Later in the session, Adam revisited his boxing career: 'Can I please talk about my boxing career again?' He proceeded to describe all his gear, special boxing gloves and shoes and the equipment he trained on at home, his 'low ceiling punching ball', 'boxing bag' and home gym.

'Yeah, I got de perfect gym from America ta work out on - The Perfect Gym y'know what's advertised', he boasted.

The other boys could hardly contain their envy and excitement.

'Oh, that's not fair', retorted Jack.

'Yeah that's not fair. Can I come to your place?' asked Matthew eagerly, 'Yeah, 'cause I'd like to do some boxing. Yeah, I think I'd like to some boxing', he said.

Justin was a little sceptical about Adam's boxing stories however. 'You're not the real champion', he stated with suspicion.

'Yes I am', Adam replied arrogantly and with certainty. 'Go to Lilydale!' he remarked, sharply spitting each syllable at Justin.

'Rocky is', Justin interrupted, 'except Rocky is the real champion'.

''Cept Rocky isn't even real', Adam replied, rolling his eyes upward. 'It's Silester Stallone who plays Rocky', he said in exasperation. 'Der!'

'Oh touchy', Justin remarked, appearing embarrassed as the other boys laughed in amusement. …

'Can I get a drink Ms. Keddie?' Justin asked me later in the session.

'No', Adam interrupted before I could respond, 'y'have ta listen to what I have ta say Buster!'

'Buster!' Justin repeated, turning to face Adam, upon which both boys began 'play' fighting, elbowing and shoving each other.

'That's a warning to both of you', I stated to Adam and Justin. Upon hearing this, both boys turned to look at me and stopped their fighting.

Soon after this, Justin made a remark about his Power Ranger figurine collection.

'I got all of them!' he stated proudly to the group.

'Not your turn ta speak Buster!' Adam interjected loudly, silencing Justin. Moments later Justin was waiting patiently for the highlighter pen to be passed to him so that he could contribute to the conversation.

> ‘Adam, I’ve got my hand up’, he stated, waving his hand and looking at Adam expectantly.
>
> ‘Do you want to pass the pen to Justin?’ I asked of Adam.
>
> Adam ignored me and with deliberate slowness, gave the pen to Matthew.
>
> ‘What!’ Justin responded, clearly upset, and reached over the table, disrupting the tabletop contents and knocking the pen forcefully from Matthew’s hand.
>
> ‘Ow!’ Matthew exclaimed loudly, retracting his hand.
>
> ‘That’s your second warning, Justin’, I stated, ‘for hurting Matthew’, I explained.
>
> ‘I had none, no I didn’t, that’s my first!’ Justin protested.
>
> ‘And one more warnin’ an’ you’re going back ta class’, retorted Adam, ‘an’ that’d be good, ‘cause you’re being a pain in de butt’, he continued, looking at the others with a smirk.
>
> A few minutes later, Justin again raised his hand to speak. ‘Ah, hey’, Justin said to Ravi, waving his hand around, ‘Can I’ve the pen, I’ve got my hand up’.
>
> Ignoring Justin’s plea, Ravi passed the pen to Jack, who also had his hand up. Justin responded by hitting Jack’s arm away and grabbing the pen from Ravi.
>
> ‘Oh thanks!’ Justin remarked with a sheepish grin.
>
> ‘NO!’ Ravi shouted, ‘I gave it to Jack!’
>
> ‘Off you go’, I said to Justin, giving him his third and final warning. ‘Sorry, you have to go’, I added, ‘Ravi gave the pen to Jack’.
>
> Justin slammed the pen down on to the desk in response and started to cry. I was taken aback as he dived under one of the chairs, clearly distressed and crying. I tried to soften the blow by giving him ‘another chance’.
>
> ‘One more chance Justin?’ I said, ‘Justin? One more chance’.
>
> ‘No!’ was the muffled response from under the chair, ‘no’. …

At the end of the session, I sent all of the boys back to class and managed to persuade a teary-eyed Justin to come out from under the chair. I tried to console him as I accompanied him back to class, where I attempted to explain my interpretation of Justin’s distress to his teacher, Mrs W. I was quite puzzled at how upset he was and detailed this to Mrs W. I explained how we had introduced behavioural guidelines and speculated that Justin’s distress was possibly a result of the enforcement of these guidelines. I also briefly detailed the behaviours which had culminated in Justin exhausting his three warnings and my attempt to send him back to class. I then left the school for the day, feeling a nagging sense of guilt knowing that my session with the boys had resulted in such anguish for Justin. …

Mrs W explained to me later that Justin had behaved particularly badly after the *Favourite Toys* session. He had yelled at Mrs W and his mother just before 'home-time' and his mother had worriedly informed Mrs W that morning that he had been distressed most of the night, wetting his bed twice. One of the main reasons for his torment, the teacher believed, was a comment Adam had made to him before the group's session which referred to Justin's prized toy tow truck: 'Your truck sucks, Justin'. After much anguish, Justin had tearfully told his mother about the comment. Adam denied that he had said anything about Justin's truck, however Mrs W confided: 'that's just like Adam to say something like that'. Mrs W explained that she felt compelled to intervene in the way she did because Justin's mother had become involved and requested that she 'sort it out'. 'I get a bit concerned when parents complain', she told me (reflective journal, 04/08/99).

Reactions and Critiques

While Mrs W and Justin's mother did not directly or explicitly critique my supervision of the boys, I suspected that they both thought, in the very least, that I was partly responsible for Justin's emotional distress and that I should have done 'more' to prevent it. Mrs. W. seemed to satisfy Justin's mother and herself in preventing further 'distress' during my sessions by requesting that they be held at the back of her classroom, rather than in the school's separate conference room. Additionally, Justin was urged to notify either his teacher or myself regarding any future concerns. Alongside my feelings of guilt, I was quite surprised and taken aback by the whole incident and began to question my positioning in all of it. Further to this, I recognised that while I was genuinely concerned for Justin, I also worried about how the incident and its ensuing interventions might 'contaminate' my data during future sessions. The following question began to plague me: how could I reflect anything like the peer group 'realities' of this group of boys? I now had to work with the boys at the back of their classroom and intervene whenever I thought the boys might be feeling distressed. Regardless, I was convinced that the situation could and should not repeat itself.

The critique I received when I presented the core aspects of this narrative at the Australian conference was also in reference to my lack of intervention in preventing Justin's emotional distress. After presenting the dialogue sequences between Adam and Justin, I was told 'that's a clear case of bullying' by one person and 'why didn't you pick Adam up on his behaviour?' by another. I experienced similar critique at a research seminar a few months later. In both cases, I tried to justify my actions in relation to my research intention; that I was attempting to reflect the peer group 'realities' and social interactions of these young boys and saw excessive intervention on my part as 'contaminating' these 'realities'. The members of both audiences were clearly not completely satisfied with this explanation.

Analysis and Interrogation of My Intervention Strategies

I focused my initial analysis of aspects of this narrative on the interactions of Justin and Adam, in particular Justin's reaction to Adam's belittlement. Upon foregrounding the 'altercations' and power struggles between the boys, I recognised

a number of factors that could be held accountable for Justin's distress. Firstly, it was clear that Adam was positioned 'at the top of the attention ladder' (Harris, 1998, p. 245). It was his knowledge and behaviours that were valued by the group, and in this sense he was afforded privileges which impacted on the group's attitudes and behaviours. He was permitted to monopolise and interrupt the discussion with little resistance from the other boys. Indeed, it can be gleaned from the attention the boys afforded Adam that they willingly positioned him as leader.

In contrast, Justin's attempts to direct attention to himself through physical means such as playfighting with Adam were met with exclusion from of the group and culminated in him exhausting his three warnings and my attempt to send him back to class. Then there was the later discovery of the disparaging comment made by Adam before the session: 'Your truck sucks, Justin'. This would have been obviously upsetting for him, particularly given Adam's high status within the group.

Although I felt able to explain much of Justin's distress, I still somehow felt that I had been complicit in Justin's distress through the voyeuristic element of my research and in allowing the dynamics of verbal interaction to proceed with little intervention. I allowed Adam's emotional bullying to develop because I was guided by my research intention to explore the language and power relations of the boys' social interactions. On each occasion Justin was belittled or ignored by Adam or the others, I failed to intervene. Needless to say, this emotional bullying was partly responsible for Justin's distress and on reflection, my lack of intervention had a lot to do with my knowledge at the time that I was collecting powerful and significant data about the social dynamics of this boys' peer group.

Also of clear distress to Justin was my enforcement of the guidelines for behaviour. In curtailing threats to physical rather than emotional safety, I intervened on all occasions. Interestingly, all of these instances may be perceived as resulting directly from the emotional bullying Justin experienced. Despite attempting to introduce 'behavioural guidelines' purporting to provide a 'safe' and supportive environment that enabled all the boys to have their say, I had allowed Adam to interrupt and monopolise the talk through my interest in his verbal skills and vivid imagination. On reflection, I knew he was providing me with powerful data. On the other hand, I disallowed Justin's physical strategies to interrupt and gain attention because they posed a threat to the boys' physical safety. In this regard, my intervention strategies were both shaped by my research concerns and shaping of the boys' behaviour.

Resolving the Issue

Partly as a result of this experience, I gradually dispensed with the use of the highlighter pen and warning system as a method of turn-taking and behavioural control over the next few sessions. On reflection, I saw this method as contrived and excessively structured in terms of interrupting the 'natural' talk process. Furthermore, it seemed to me that the boys were using the highlighter pen as an exaggerated form of symbolic power over each other. While I resolved to allow the boys' conversation to develop organically with as little structured or authorial

intervention as possible, I developed a number of strategies to protect emotional and physical safety during future sessions. These included re-guiding the discussion to another topic to detract from distressing altercations between the boys, engaging the boys in stimulus activities such as drawing and role-play to prevent boredom, and providing debriefing opportunities as a form of closure and resolve to our sessions. In this regard, I encouraged the boys on an individual and group basis to explore feelings and emotions arising from the session.

There were a few occasions, however, when the boys' behaviour became so 'silly' and potentially dangerous that I was compelled to cut these sessions short as a protective measure. In this regard, I perceived that 'dissolving the session' rather than engaging in judgemental disciplinary or confrontational strategies was preferable, because I felt that my use of such strategies would exacerbate the adult/child power differential and contaminate the data in ways that would excessively restrict and sanitise the boys' talk. Most significantly however, as a result of Justin's distress, I became acutely aware of my intervention strategies with the boys in relation to how my research intentions shaped my positioning within the dynamics of the group and the behaviour of the boys. This awareness was critical in adopting a self-reflexive approach to my research.

Through the development of a self-conscious and self-reflexive stance and in recognition of my 'researcher locatedness' (Davies, 1999), I began to question the invested positionality of my research intentions, attempting to 'come to grips with the reality of my own self-interests' (Amos Hatch, 1995, p. 220) as well as make visible and critically evaluate my impact in shaping the participants' accounts of 'reality'. By understanding and unravelling the ways in which the boy's behaviour may have been shaped by my research intention and the constructedness of the environment I had created for them, I could explicate a situated analysis of both the knower and the known (Pendlebury, 1998). I needed to make transparent the specific meanings and values of the feminist subjectivities and discourses that were central in informing and shaping my work (Foucault in Davies, 1999; Jones, 1992). Through engaging in continual self-reflexivity, I accepted the embeddedness and fragmented nature of my own subjectivity in framing the research and shaping my interpretations. I also acknowledged the partial and irreducibly constructed nature of the study (Prain, 1997). In this regard, I believed I was better placed to address the ethical questions relating to the justification for my research, such as 'What is my relationship to the participants?' and 'Should I intervene on behalf of those at risk?' (Amos Hatch, 1995, p. 221), thus gaining a greater understanding of the children's behaviour.

Asking these sorts of self-reflexive questions was a critical part of assessing the ethical soundness of my research, resulting in my awareness of the inconsistency of my intervention strategies and their implication in shaping the boys' behaviour. These questions also allowed me to develop intervention strategies to better protect the emotional and physical safety of the boys. However, as Amos Hatch (1995, pp. 221-222) points out, 'researchers need not be paralysed by ethical concerns'. Through self-reflexive practice, 'we can contribute important knowledge without

appropriating participants' experiences, understandings, and even their miseries to serve our own ends'.

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