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Children as *research participants* in educational research using video-stimulated accounts



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ABSTRACT

While children may be positioned as active participants in early years research, few studies have detailed how this is accomplished from a child's perspective. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis methodologies examine the recorded interactions of children (aged 5–9 years) in video-stimulated accounts. Sequential analyses highlight four interactional strategies the children used to steer the talk including 1) interrupting the researcher's flow of questioning 2) employing physical actions such as proximity and gaze; 3) diverting the topic; and 4) using the video-stimulated accounts as openings to enact their own interactional agendas. Detailing the unfolding turns of talk make it possible to show how children are competent when considered as research participants and the opportunities provided through video-stimulated accounts.

1. Introduction

A cartoon included in the *Sociologist's book of cartoons* (The New Yorker, 2004), depicts an adult asking a small child to report on their experiences of school. When the cartoon was published, 1978, research asking children their opinion was considered humorous. Within the last four decades views on children in research have shifted from a focus on children as objects to children as active participants in research, deserving of social recognition (Mason & Danby, 2011; Morrow, 2005; Prout & James, 1997; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). Methods of involving children in research include seeking children's opinions and involving children in decisions about data collection methods and what to study (see Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009; Mazzoni & Harcourt, 2014; O'Kane, 2008). Despite calls to include children actively in research rather than as research objects, little attention has been given to the action of *how* children do participate and the interplay with researchers in research contexts. With some exceptions (see Danby, Ewing and Thorpe, 2011; Dorner, 2015; Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Waller & Bitou, 2011), even less attention has been given to the actual interactional strategies children use to enact agency and demonstrate their competence as research participants. This article draws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to show *the ways in which* children demonstrate competence in research and displays the contingent nature of research design and methods.

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1.1. Children's participation in research

An increasing number of studies attend to children's participation in research. In their meta-analysis of 10 international early years journals (published 2009–2012), [Mayne and Howitt \(2014\)](#) reveal that 549 articles of a possible 17,000 were focused on research and children. Of these 79% were research on children, 17% research with children and 2% by children. These studies promote that opportunities for children to have influence are enabled when they are involved in the research design; collection or analysis of data ([Hart, 1992](#); [Shier, 2001](#)) and the potential for adults to 'misinterpret' children's contributions is reduced ([Alderson, 2000](#); [Darbyshire et al., 2005](#); [Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015](#); [O'Kane, 2008](#)). However, potential problems emerge when children are thought of as a homogenous group and not considered to have diverse views ([Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2011](#)). When age, appropriate developmental level or perceived ability of children to be competent participants is questioned ([Scott, 2000](#)) the 'trustworthiness' of children's accounts comes into doubt ([Dockett & Perry, 2007](#)). These concerns result in children's participation remaining superficial at times ([Holland et al., 2010](#); [Pettersson, 2015](#); [Sinclair, 2004](#)).

Studies that closely examine the interactional context and the interplay between the researchers and participants, however, show that actions and responses within research encounters may be associated with the standpoint of the researcher or analyst. In some cases, the lens of the 'child' category is prioritized, typically at the exclusion of other categories such as gender, ethnicity, research participant or the aspects of the local context. A shift in analytical standpoint enables the interactional features and strategies to be observed from the point of view of the research participants *themselves*, rather than from an outsider's interpretation with assumptions of 'childlike'. From this standpoint, the ways that children align themselves with the interviewer might be evident, as they try to provide a 'correct' response that they think an adult might want to hear ([Aronsson & Hundeide, 2002](#); [Pinter & Zandian, 2015](#)). Similarly, how children may focus on providing what they *think* researchers might want to hear rather than producing relevant reports, is made visible ([Hester, 2000](#)). Using this lens, children's lack of response might be investigated as avoidance, diversion or resistance to adult questioning, rather than attributed to their childish ignorance ([Evang & Øverlien, 2015](#); [Hutchby, 2002](#); [Iversen, 2012](#)).

The interactional elements of the research encounter can be closely examined when a classification of children as *research participants* is applied rather than the classification of *child in research* ([Danby, 2017](#); [Mason & Danby, 2011](#)). From this standpoint, children as *research participants* involves considering participants' rights, roles and actions in relation to the co-constructed interactional context of research encounter ([Danby, 2017](#); [Graue & Walsh, 1998](#); [Potter & Hepburn, 2005](#)). A sequential analysis of interactions between researcher, participants and the context in which research occurs, highlights the members' perspectives rather than an analyst's interpretation of the interaction.

Research is a dynamic process where researchers cannot foresee how participants may respond ([Davies, 2014](#); [Roulston, 2014](#)). Acknowledging the influence of the context in which the research encounter takes place and attending to the interactional sequence enables analysts to show the interactional strategies of *how* children co-construct their competence as *research participants*. This approach takes into account the collaboratively built nature of conversation.

2. Method: video-ethnography and video-stimulated accounts

Data are taken from two separate studies conducted in inner city Brisbane, Australia. The first video-ethnography, 'Participation and social order in the playground' (Study 1), examined children's peer culture and participation in a preschool playground, recording the interactions of 24 children (4–6 years) and one teacher for approximately three hours a day over two months. The second ethnography, 'The Playground Project' (Study 2), investigated teachers' management of children's disputes in the playgrounds of two schools. Children, aged 5–8 years, were video-recorded during 10 playtimes. Approximately 120 children and two teachers participated. Ethical approvals for each study were granted from the author's university human research board and informed, written consent was sought from each child's legal guardian. Each child indicated initial assent ([Conroy & Harcourt, 2009](#)) and ongoing consent ([Danby & Farrell, 2004](#)). After video-recording in the playground, children in each study watched extracts of the video-recordings in which they were involved and they provided accounts (audio-recorded in Study 1 and video-recorded in Study 2). In total, 15 video-stimulated accounts were produced in Study 1, and 12 were produced during Study 2.

Video-stimulated accounts can be compared to semi-structured interviews. In video-stimulated accounts, an extract of video-recording from a previous interaction is played to stimulate conversation about exchanges that took place ([Theobald, 2012](#); [Pomerantz, 2010](#)). Semi-structured interviews have a series of identified topics for discussion ([Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1988](#)), while a video-stimulated account uses video-recorded interactions to prompt talk ([2012](#)). In both methods, researchers may employ open-ended questions to provide opportunities to explore matters of possible interest to participants ([Theobald, 2012](#); [Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1988](#)). As in interviews, participants use their local understandings to draw upon what they may consider to be expected codes of behaviour ([Baker, 1997](#); [Potter & Hepburn, 2005](#)). However the aim of video-stimulated accounts is to elicit conversation, not recall past interactional events, differing from recall interviews ([Theobald, 2012](#); [Pomerantz, 2010](#)). As such, video-stimulated accounts are interactional events in their own right during which accounts are co-produced and responded to.

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