Childhood

Children's Voices on Ways of Having a Voice : Children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation

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CHILDREN'S VOICES ON WAYS OF HAVING A VOICE
Children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation

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Drawing on relevant literature and a study carried out by the author and colleagues, this article reviews the evidence about children's expressed views on methods used by adults to obtain children's views. It identifies key considerations deployed by children to account for those preferences. Children are normally passive with respect to method choice, but they negotiate differing degrees of engagement related to considerations such as time control, comfort with the research medium, rewardingness and privacy. Their views about methods of research and consultation are sharply affected by notions of inclusiveness and fairness.

Introduction

This article is concerned with the views expressed by children and young people[1] about the methods used by adults in research and in consultation, where the aim is to obtain children's perspectives on social topics. The focus is on methods that involve direct communication between children and researchers or consultants.

The aim of this contribution is to highlight the directly expressed views of children and young people about methods used in research and consultation. There are problems about integrating children's ideas on both research and consultation, since these are quite distinct, albeit overlapping enterprises. However, it hoped that the problems of linking the two are outweighed by the merits of drawing on a larger pool of still limited material on different activities that use a similar spread of methods.

Participants' views on research

The topic lies at the intersection of research and children's literatures. From some research perspectives, it may not appear necessary to ask about the views of respondents on research methods, since the researcher is assumed

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to be the expert, who determines the question or hypothesis to be investigated and the means of doing so. However, most researchers accept that a person's willingness to take part in research and their particular responses to questions or prompts are affected by their motivations, expectations and social desirability effects (Black, 1999). In positivist research, such processes are threats to the quality, validity and accuracy of the data (Hennessy, 1999). By contrast, from a social construction perspective, the data generated in communication with research participants are regarded as a product of joint respondent–researcher interaction, not a provision of 'pure' information or viewpoints from the respondent (Huberman and Miles, 2002). For these and other reasons, it can be valuable for any researcher to understand how potential respondents may view particular methods or indeed how they have actually reacted to them in practice, since this will illuminate the effectiveness of the research communication in obtaining full and representative data.

In practice, it is not common for researchers to ask people what they think about research methods and even rarer for this to be reported in publications. Sometimes researchers will obtain feedback on detailed elements of the research instruments used during a pilot phase, although details of this will often not be made public.

Feedback on research and consultation methods used with children

The preceding comments apply equally to research with adults and children, but there are also special issues in relation to the latter (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Research with children is one example of the interfaces between the social institutions and cultures produced by adults and by children in two senses. The purpose and content of the research correspond with adult interests in understanding more about children's activities, perspectives, problems, joys and so on (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998; James and Prout, 1990). At the same time, the research or consultation process itself is a form of engagement between adults operating from certain agencies within specific roles and children situated in particular settings and contexts. It embodies the individualized intergenerational *relationships* between one or more researchers and children, while also reflecting broader *relations* between the generations (Alanen, 2003).

In some ways there may be more of an impetus to obtain feedback from children than from adults about research and consultation methods. Some people feel less confident about communication with children and so give more attention to the process, while they may take for granted the ways in which they obtain information and views from adults. It is also the case, that over the last 10–15 years a strong movement has arisen among some professionals, researchers, children's organizations and young people in favour of optimizing their participation in relation to an array of issues

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affecting them. This participatory climate both helped promote and has been fortified by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially Article 12, which affirms children's entitlement to express their views on matters affecting them.

Nonetheless, it is not easy to find references to children's views on methods in relevant publications. One review concluded that virtually no systematic research exists on children's understandings of research and response to research procedures (Melton and Stanley, 1996). Moreover, where feedback from children about methods is described in the literature, this is usually based on comments on a particular study or consultation they were taking part in, so that both comparative experiences and the viewpoints of non-participants were absent.

Colleagues and I were commissioned by a committee of the Scottish parliament to review evidence about the 'best' ways of obtaining children's perspectives (Borland et al., 2001). For the sake of brevity, this is referred to in the rest of this article as the 'parliament study'.[2] This article blends findings from that study with insights from other relevant literature, primarily European in source. Alongside interviews with academic and professional 'experts', the study sampled a cross-section of children in schools and special groups (Stafford et al., 2003), so it included the views of children who had not participated in research or consultation as well as those who had.

We faced the conundrum of having to choose methods to gather data before we had heard from the children what they thought were the best methods. We elected to use two methods: group discussions and questionnaires. These were seen as the most economical ways of tapping the views of a sizeable number of children and benefiting from the mutual commentary and flow of ideas from groups, while also obtaining individual standpoints (Kitzinger, 1994). Eighteen focus group discussions were held, 12 in mainstream schools with children aged 5–15 years. The other six groups targeted 'special groups', including preschool children, disabled children and minority ethnic young people, accessed through community projects. The discussions included opportunities to vote on preferences about ways of conveying views. Except for the youngest, group participants completed a short questionnaire about their views on consultation and research methods.

Research, consultation and participation involving children

This article draws on evidence about children's views on both research and consultation. A rationale for this can be made on the grounds that several of the main methods of finding out children's perspectives are common to both enterprises. This applies to interviews, group discussions and questionnaires, for instance. However, an obvious drawback is that research and consultation often have quite distinct purposes, which will affect how children and young people experience and describe the methods used. In particular, con-

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sultation is normally instituted to inform or change policy or practice in a direct fashion, whereas this is a more indirect aim of applied research, while the goal of other research is the development of knowledge and/or theory.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of consultation and of qualitative research with children and young people. This reflects a number of influences, including the growth of a participatory rights perspective and of social studies of childhood (Hill et al., 2004). At the same time, the methods of communicating with children used by some academics and practitioners have converged. For instance, increasing proportions of researchers have adopted qualitative methods and become committed to an interest in children as subjects and active agents experiencing and shaping their own lives (Christensen and James, 2000; Greene and Hill, 2005; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). On the other hand, practitioners have developed innovative ways of interacting with children, while more have become expert in the use of methods that were previously mainly restricted to researchers.

As a result, there has been increasing overlap between the two spheres, with both now encompassing a wide range from the highly informal to formal, with many variations and combinations in between. Certain agencies have carried out questionnaire surveys or sponsored interview studies (e.g. McCausland, 2000; Shaw, 1998), while games, role play and exercises are now quite common in academic research, partly for interactional and partly for data gathering purposes (e.g. Hill et al., 1996; Hill and Triseliotis, 1991; Morgan et al., 2002; O'Kane, 2000).

Another point to consider is the difference between consultation and participation (Figure 1). The terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but it is helpful to distinguish between consultation as finding out views in order to inform decisions, and participation where direct inputs are made into decision-making (Cutler, 2002; Dorrian et al., 2001; McNeish, 1999). Clarifying such distinctions is particularly important where the usual differentials of power and interest between decision-makers and citizens are reinforced by generational status.

This article focuses on the *processes* of research and consultation, so it is important to make clear at the outset, that young people are primarily *outcome* oriented. When asked their views, they expect a response. Many are disappointed or disillusioned when nothing happens afterwards (Durham County Council, 2000; France et al., 2000; Hill et al., 2004; Morrow, 2000; Shenton, 1999; Sinclair and Franklin, 2000).

Ways of assessing children's viewpoints

Various criteria have been adopted by researchers to assess children's views on research processes. One is the amount or fullness of responses to questions or prompts. On this basis, several writers have concluded that young people disclose as much or rather more about behaviour in computer
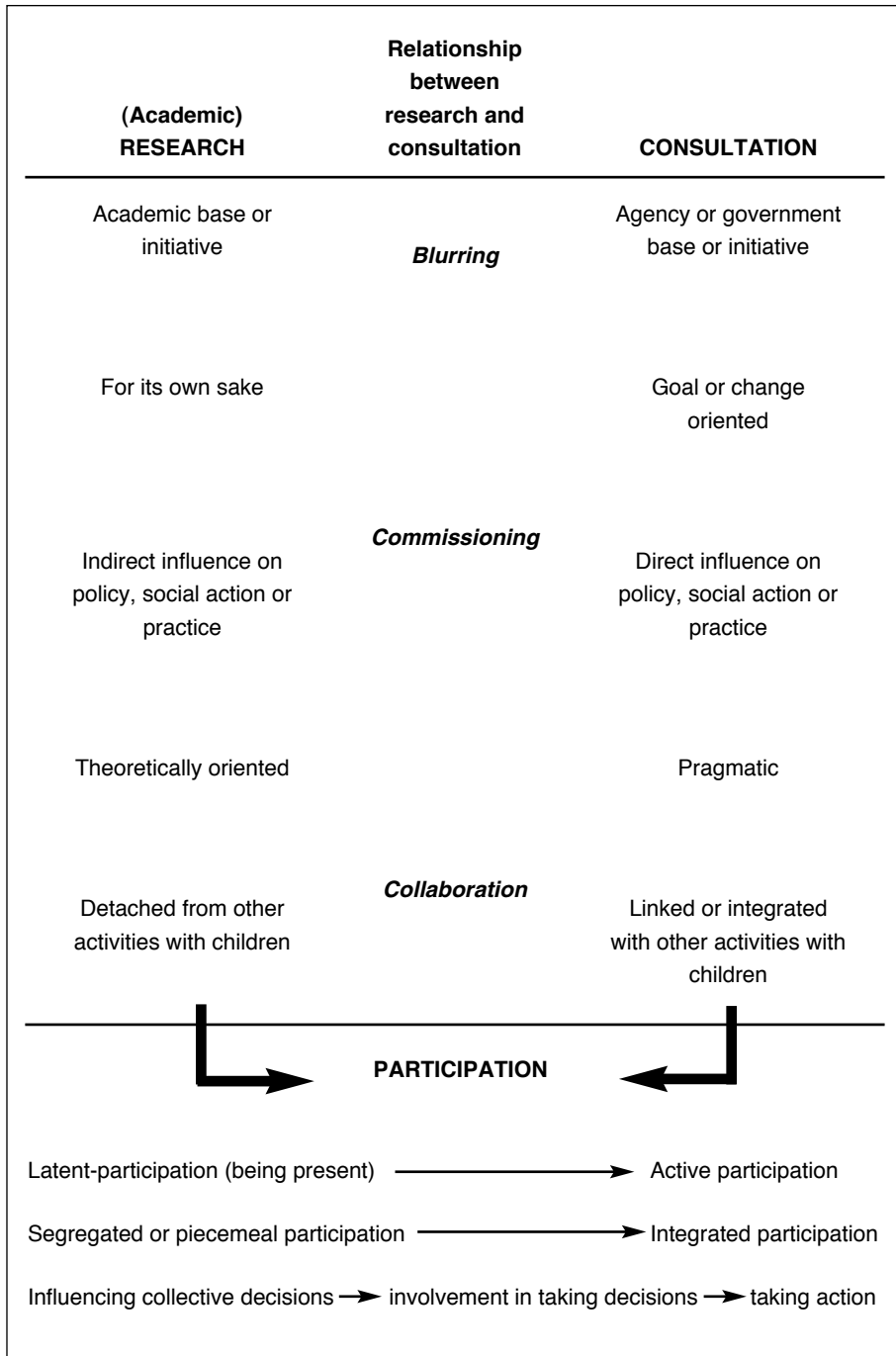
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(Academic) RESEARCH	Relationship between research and consultation	CONSULTATION
Academic base or initiative	*Blurring*	Agency or government base or initiative
For its own sake		Goal or change oriented
Indirect influence on policy, social action or practice	*Commissioning*	Direct influence on policy, social action or practice
Theoretically oriented		Pragmatic
Detached from other activities with children	*Collaboration*	Linked or integrated with other activities with children

PARTICIPATION

Latent-participation (being present) ⟶ Active participation

Segregated or piecemeal participation ⟶ Integrated participation

Influencing collective decisions ⟶ involvement in taking decisions ⟶ taking action

Figure 1 Gathering information and views

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questionnaires than they do in self-administered 'pencil and paper' question-naires and face-to-face interviews (Beebe et al., 1998; Millstein and Irwin, 1983; Turner et al., 1998; Webb et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1998). Researchers and consultants have often formed judgements based on their observations, usually unsystematic, of children's levels of enjoyment and engagement (e.g. Christensen, 2004; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). It has been noted that some children are not forthcoming in a group but open up in an individual interview, while others are nervous on a one-to-one basis and more confident in a group (Punch, 2002). It is important not to confuse posi-tive experience with effectiveness, though. One-off consultation events are very popular, but they are expensive and often appear to have very little impact (Borland et al., 2001; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000).

Children's preferences are sometimes ascertained more directly when they are given options about which methods of communication will be used. For instance, Stalker and Connors (2003) gave children an opportunity to prepare a story, tape or drawing prior to an interview. Some took up the offer, others did not. Emond (2002) discussed with young people in residen-tial care at the first point of contact in her study how they preferred to express themselves and adapted her research plans in the light of this, so that some of her interviews consisted only of talk, whereas others included draw-ing, games and role play.

In the rest of this article, some account is taken of researchers' obser-vations, but the primary focus is on what children themselves have actually said. This has the advantage of conveying directly the views of children, albeit selectively and with interpretation. It is recognized that this approach is limited, just like research itself, by the numbers of children who have been given an opportunity to express their views, the medium used and the requirement for the verbalized opinions to reach the public domain. A further restriction is that quite commonly the literature refers to children having been asked *what* they like or prefer, but does not indicate *why* they have these preferences.

Orientation to research

Generally children and young people do not perceive attempts by adults to gain their views from a blank slate position. The 20th century saw a marked shift in practice by parents and teachers in Britain and elsewhere away from authoritarian styles of upbringing and education (e.g. Baumrind, 1991). Most children are used to being asked questions for a wide range of purpos-es, ranging from testing knowledge in school to responding to quizzes and competitions in the media and advertising. They will often have experience not only as recipients but as investigators (Alderson, 2001b; Kellett et al., 2004).

A few writers have discussed children's orientations to taking part in

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adult-initiated research. The comments of children in several studies (Borland et al., 2001; Edwards and Alldred, 1999; Morton and Hill, 2001) suggest the following stances that children take to research, stemming from a combination of their general orientation to communication and the specific context (e.g. site in class, at home or elsewhere; content of the research or consultation; methods used):

- Engaged – enthusiastic about taking part;
- Open – willing to take part;
- Self-protective – reluctant to contribute personal material;
- Detached – reluctant to provide more than minimal responses;
- Subversive – willing to break the 'rules' (e.g. by providing false or joking responses).

Respondents to a questionnaire survey on family life were asked their views on taking part (Brannen et al., 2000). Just under a third indicated they enjoyed completing the questionnaire and a further half did not mind; 6 percent ticked the 'dislike' option and 12 percent the 'partly like/partly dislike' choice.

Edwards and Alldred (1999) found that a number of discourses affecting willingness to take part:

- Interest in the *subject matter of the research*;
- *Research as personal education* – some children thought they had learned from the discussion and would learn from the research;
- *Research as therapy* – it's good to talk, the discussion increases empathy, reduces sense of being different, a child with a problem might be able to air it;
- *Research as empowerment* – it is good (for children) to be given opportunities to air their views, it is good for adults to hear from the subjects of the issue under consideration.

Punch (2002) revealed a similar range of motivations to those reported by Edwards and Alldred, but in addition noted novelty of the experience and a desire to miss class. A study of children who had been sexually abused showed altruism to be a major factor encouraging participation (Roberts and Taylor, 1993). Children who took part were generally committed to doing so as they thought telling their stories would help others. This was also to some extent 'therapeutic' in that this produced 'something positive out of what seemed an overwhelmingly negative experience' (Roberts and Taylor, 1993: 15).

A number of the more negative or cryptic comments made by children in the aforementioned studies indicated a detachment between the children's and researcher's interests, i.e. the research seemed irrelevant or not a priority

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for them. Children also pointed out that questioning about individual experience, especially at home, could be intrusive. Some children saw home life as private, not for public airing, whereas others saw benefits from making the private public (within the realm of research confidentiality). During an ethnographic study in school, children influenced the location and contexts for communication with the researcher according to their sensibilities about privacy and power (Christensen, 2004).

Young people's views on methods

It is possible and helpful to catalogue young people's views on different methods, as we did in our report for the Scottish parliament (see Stafford et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, the overall conclusion from the literature and the parliament study is that there is no one 'best' method from young people's points of view. Many young people recognize that different methods suit different people and purposes, so that ideally they should be offered a choice and range of methods (Lightfoot and Sloper, 2002b). Some prefer certain methods that others dislike, while most are able to see pros and cons in most methods, just as many research design textbooks do.

The rest of the article outlines the considerations that children themselves have indicated affect their views.

Differences between included and excluded viewpoints

The parliament study revealed that children and young people who had not been invited to take part in consultative activities or surveys understandably often had a different perspective from those who were included. Non-participants were usually more critical of youth forums, school councils and one-off events than participants. They identified both as a matter of principle and feeling that it was not right that adults were taking account of the views of only a small minority of people by top-down selection or self-nomination. The following sequence from a group show some of the points. The young people were responding to one person's statement that he had been to a consultative day conference:

> *Young person 1:* No one else had a chance to be put forward
> *Young person 2:* . . . because nobody knows about it.
> *Young person 3* (conference participant): I didn't put myself forward – I got selected from above.
> *Young person 1:* No one at [school] gets told what goes on at these conferences, and it's our lives that are being discussed . . . we don't elect you, you're just picked by adults.

The perceived deficiencies in democratic and statistical representation are related to children's ideas about fairness.

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Fairness

The words 'fair' and 'unfair' are often used by children to express their judgements of approval and disapproval. Their notion of fairness encompasses ideas of both equity and equality. They tend to dislike situations where some (appear to) have more access to opportunities than others or receive more favourable treatment. With respect to research and consultation, this is linked to criteria for inclusion and differential attention. In the parliament study, children criticized consultation mechanisms that involved only a minority. This was illustrated by one comment about our own necessarily selective approach:

> . . . there are a lot of people besides us and they didn't get a chance to join in.

However, this was seen as part of a general pattern whereby only a few were given a chance to express their views:

> *Young person 1:* If it's in our school, it's always the same people that get picked for everything.
> *Young person 2:* I've never been picked (*general agreement*).
> *Young person 3:* This is the first time I've been picked for anything.

They thought it was unfair for many to be left out and also thought the basis for selection was often biased (e.g. in favour of older pupils) (Borland et al., 2001). Similarly, some children's views were thought to carry more weight either because they were more confident in group discussions or the adults were more inclined to take their views seriously. Underpinning these comments is a complaint about children's lack of entitlement to be engaged with participatory processes or to influence who is engaged. This reflects the views commonly held by children that they lack rights and respect, especially in school contexts (Marshall and Maguire, 1998; Mayall, 2002).

Children's concerns about fairness reflect both personal and collective considerations. While a few children appeared mainly concerned that their own views were ignored, many were eager (like statisticians) to see that research and consultation should be representative. This was the reason some participants in the parliament study gave for supporting the idea of questionnaire surveys.

The wish for limited involvement

While children can resent being excluded, it is also the case that invitations to take part may be experienced as an unwelcome intrusion. Consultation and research is usually initiated by adults and originates from outside children's daily worlds (Shucksmith and Hendry, 1998). Hence, although many children and young people are often pleased to be given the chance to have their views elicited and heard, there is also a wish to restrict the extent to

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which consultation/research impinges on their own activities. A significant minority of young people say they do not want to be involved in consultation or participation (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). This fits with findings that children see their 'own time' as a precious resource, which they like to have control over and which needs protecting from adult time demands (Christensen, 2002; Christensen et al., 2000b). Family and parents often constrain children's capacity to determine their own time use (Christensen et al., 2000a), so that they value 'free time' not under adult control (Mayall, 2002) and will generally see research as an option they can exercise choice about (unless pressurized by gatekeepers).

In the parliament study, many young people made it clear that their willingness to be consulted was not a gift they should be grateful for, but more a right and one that they need not exercise if they had better things to do. Thus involvement was portrayed as contingent on possible rewards or constraints, set alongside opportunities forgone. Likewise, in a study on young people's views about NHS projects, they stressed that they disliked the implication that they should feel 'lucky' for being consulted, since the prospect and process make some uncomfortable (Lightfoot and Sloper, 2002b).

Thus decisions to take part (or to continue to take part) reflect a review of alternative costs and benefits. Participation can be attractive as an alternative to controlled time (e.g. when it takes place in school) but be seen as having less palatable opportunity costs when it intrudes on leisure time at home or in the community. Sometimes when young people have contributed to research design or fieldwork, they withdraw from the later stages, seeing that as a step too far in terms of their competence, their role or their willing availability (Clark et al., 2001a). Young people may miss or postpone appointments if something more important comes up in their social life (Triseliotis et al., 1995).

Diversity: the importance of temperament and competence

When children have been asked about their preferences with regard to research methods, it is clear that there is no consensus. Different children express different views, while some children acknowledge that what suits themselves may not suit others (Borland et al., 2001). I am not aware of any study that has examined systematically what factors affect viewpoints on this, though some adult commentators have reported on the influence of, for example, age, gender or the child's living situation (e.g. Morgan et al., 2002).

In the parliament study, children stressed the importance of personality or temperament, noting for instance that shy children may not like communicating in groups or even an individual interview and are not very effective at doing so. Hence their views may be better represented in written form.

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> Maybe children don't feel free to speak what they think in groups, and they could just write it down.

> Probably surveys [are best], because, like, some people might be, like, nervous about, like talking out in front of lots of people and stuff, and people they don't know, so they might like it better if they were just writing stuff down.

The children also noted the consequences of competence levels with regard to reading and writing, which preclude some young people from responding to questionnaires, diaries and so on. Similar points were made to Lightfoot and Sloper (2002a). Children are aware that reading and writing can be problematic for themselves or others. They see this as a major disadvantage of self-completion questionnaires:

> . . . sometimes there are words or questions you don't understand.

This links to fairness, in that young people with literacy difficulties will feel disadvantaged and their views will be underrepresented. However, this issue was addressed by 10-year-old researchers in a study that was part of a school extra-curricular research club:

> We also thought about children who might have difficulty reading some questions so we said that we would help read questions if anyone wanted us to. (Forrest and Dent, 2004: 333)

Comfort with the medium

Several researchers have noted the care and attention that children can devote to producing drawings or paintings in order to illustrate and make concrete a theme or experience (Hill et al., 1996; Morrow, 2001). Likewise, there are many reports of young people showing great commitment to role play (Freeman et al., 1996; TAG, 1999). These media for data gathering correspond to activities that children are familiar with in school and in recreational settings.

A young person's survey on health-related behaviour developed its methods for obtaining the views of children aged 11–15 by using focus groups to give feedback on the planned approach (Scott, 2000). The intention was to use structured questionnaires very similar to those being used for the children's parents. The children liked the idea of listening to the questions on tape rather than having to read, though their responses were given in writing.

It has been readily assumed by adults that virtually all children nowadays are highly competent with computers, often more so than the older generation. However, there are many indications that this is an oversimplified view. Several pieces of work have shown that interest in, access to and skills in computer-based activity vary considerably, with higher proportions of boys than girls and of children from higher income/education households being advantaged in these respects (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Mann

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and Stewart, 2000). In the parliament study many children had difficulties getting regular or even any access to a computer at home or school, while Internet cafes were seen as expensive. Some had experienced technical difficulties and believed the system was open to misuse. Concerns about privacy were also expressed.

The parliament study also found that only a minority of young people favoured on-line methods for consulting them about their views. Only three of the 18 groups voted for these as a preferred method and the responses on individual questionnaires were also largely negative.

Young people's input into the design

Increasingly, researchers are consulting children about the materials they use for data gathering (e.g. Alderson, 2001b; Thomas et al., 1999). Young people generally think that if they or their peers have influenced the questions they are asked, then the response will be better. In a consultation with young people about health services, Lightfoot and Sloper (2002a) attributed a good response rate to the fact that young people helped put the questionnaire together.

Similarly a local authority asked a range of young people what was their preferred option to express their views on setting up a youth forum. The most popular response was to fill in questionnaires that young people themselves helped to construct (Adams and Ingham, 1998).

The use of young people as researchers is growing and some voluntary organizations engage young people throughout the process (Alderson, 1995; Clark et al., 2001b; Howland and Bethell, 2002; Kellett et al., 2004). Some evidence indicates that this does encourage other young people to be more open to those they see as being more similar in terms of age and experience.

Fun and relaxation

Children are attracted to methods that give very immediate pleasure. Thus, it is commonly reported that group discussions are fun, especially when there are activities and exercises (Punch, 2002). Similarly, one of the main reasons young people like one-off consultative events is that these are usually designed to optimize enjoyment. Alderson (2001b) observed that when children carry out their own research using interviews of groups, they tend to use exercises that help 'one another feel confident and relaxed'.

Conversely, a number of young people report that written questionnaires are boring (Borland et al., 2001). This can evoke 'subversive' responses. It will come as no surprise to anyone who has conducted a questionnaire survey to know that a few admit giving false answers to make the experience more enjoyable:

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> If you are given it in class, you just put down what your friend's putting down,
> or do something for a joke.

Sociability, exchange of ideas and power

A number of people have asked children and young people to express a preference between individual communication with an adult researcher/consultant and taking part in groups. Usually, most express a preference for the group mode of communication (e.g. Lightfoot and Sloper, 2003; Punch, 2002; Morrow, 1999b), though a minority hold the opposite view.

Since groups that are arranged for consultation and perhaps less often research tend to include fun activities and refreshments, it is sometimes hard to distinguish the significance of the group setting per se. However, children indicate that they feel more supported and less shy in the company of peers (Borland et al., 2001):

> I preferred the group discussion [to the individual interview], because it was easier to talk with friends there. (Punch, 2002)

They value sharing, both in the sense of everyone contributing and not feeling singled out as in an individual interview (Morrow, 1999a: 309; Punch, 2002: 48):

> I like a group, so that we can all put in our ideas.

> You could look at things from more points of view.

> We don't think it is just one of us that's got the problem . . . it's all of us.

It may be inferred, too, that peers dilute the power dynamics compared with an individual child faced with an adult, who is often a stranger. This does not mean of course that power issues are absent in groups, where the influence of general adult–child relations and expectations are often compounded by a context in which adults are in control, as in school (Baker and Hinton, 1999; Mayall and Zeiher, 2003).

In groups, power and hierarchy manifest themselves as a child–child as well as adult–child phenomenon. Children's comments on group discussions, one-off events and participatory structures reveal resentment that certain people dominate – by talking more and inhibiting others. This in turn led to unfair representation, which might be better gained through a questionnaire survey (Borland et al., 2001):

> You're not going to be talked over if you've got a survey.

Researchers have recognized that in focus groups with children, some may say little or nothing, especially when they did not know each other before (Mitchell, 1999). Increasingly, therefore, researchers speak with friendship groups or ask children to bring along friends (Green and Hart, 1999; Hoppe et al., 1995). Mayall (2000) found that younger children were

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more forthcoming when they were able choose a friend to join in her conversations with them. Members of participatory groups have pointed to the greater ease they feel when they have 'stuff in common' with others present (McNeish, 1999). In the parliament study, almost everyone agreed that groups work best if members know each other – it is easier talking with your friends. However, a few said it was easier to be frank and discuss sensitive issues in a group with people you do not know and will not meet again.

The importance of privacy

We know from the child welfare and health literature that privacy, confidentiality and concern about intrusiveness are very important issues for young people, especially with regard to sensitive personal matters (Emond, 2002; Hill, 1999). Similar considerations also arise when they are being asked for their thoughts and opinions on more general matters. Children have voiced concerns about needing to let peers know their opinions or experiences in group discussions and the potential for others to see what you have written using a computer (Borland et al., 2001). In feedback comparing individual and group interviews, Punch (2002) found that some children preferred the former because of the confidentiality and privacy:

> You could say things without your friend knowing.

> I could say what I wanted and not have to watch what I said.

Questionnaires are seen as having the merit of anonymity (Lightfoot and Sloper, 2002b). This reassures children that what they say will not be spread around as it might following a group or class discussion. It may also be easier to provide information indirectly:

> I'd rather write if it was someone I don't know. (Morrow, 1999a: 309)

However, children may feel uncomfortable about questions they regard as intrusive. In free comments about a questionnaire on family life, some of the children expressed critical remarks about the personal nature of some of the questions (Brannen et al., 2000).

The importance of context and setting

Evidence has shown that children are highly sensitive to the context in which research takes place. Children interpret what adults say to them and respond to questions according to expectations about what they think is expected of them, influenced by their perceptions of the micro-environment in which research takes place (Christensen, 2004; McKechnie, 2002).

Much research with children takes place within schools or the children's homes. In general, children in the parliament study preferred school as a setting for surveys, but most stressed that questionnaires should be

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administered by outsiders, not teachers, to avoid influence and censorship.

Children's behaviour in schools is very much affected by the expectations and customs of that institution, which shape how they perceive an external researcher or consultant. Many writers have commented on how the nature and content of the communication in school-based studies have been shaped by children transposing expectations about school tasks to research tasks and about teachers to researchers (e.g. Buckingham, 1994; James et al., 1998). Outsiders are often treated like teachers (e.g. being called 'sir' or 'miss') and communication patterned on the classroom (e.g. putting hands up to be 'allowed' to speak). On the other hand, a researcher may be welcomed just because they are not a teacher (Morrow, 1999a). Much will depend on how the researcher seeks to locate themselves within the school environment. Thus standing in front of a class during a teaching period is most akin to teaching, whereas mingling informally outside classrooms and teaching times allows for greatest distance between teaching and researcher roles (e.g. James, 1993). In each case, though, 'children and young people will attribute some form of role to researchers rather than none' (Edwards and Alldred, 1999: 276).

Although interviews with children in their own homes and other venues (like a university or clinic) are not uncommon, it is not easy to locate reports of children being asked or volunteering their views on that. With regard to decisions in their everyday lives, it seems most children feel more listened to at home than at school (Mayall, 1994; Morrow, 1999a), though there are exceptions. Children can be concerned that what they say will become known to key adults, whether they are parents at home or teachers at school. This affects what they are prepared to say (Morrow, 1999a; Borland et al., 2001).

Conclusions

Children represent their views about research as both people and as children. Thus much of what they say could well be echoed by adults, for example with regard to preferences about method, passivity and arbitrariness of involvement. There is no inherent gulf between what young people say they want from research or consultation and the values of sympathetic adults or the principles of sound research. Equally, children's views and the experiences on which they are based are crucially affected by their social position, where generally their capacity to influence and respond to adult actions is limited and at the discretion of adults in their lives, but where there is scope for choices and an alternative sphere of peer influence and activity.

The attitudes, motivation and actions of children with respect to engagement in research, consultation or even substantive participation both reflects and illuminates wider relations between adults and children as generational groups, as well as children's cultures of communication, orienta-

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tions and experiences of space, time and action. Children's experiences of research and consultation are largely passive. They usually have little control over the opportunities that may arise for them to express their views to adults, especially on common issues as opposed to personal matters. Adults also tend to determine the broad method for asking children their views, though some qualitative researchers offer choices on the detailed aspects. Within the constraints of the power situation they find themselves in, children negotiate and contest, sometimes negatively from an adult perspective (e.g. the joking response to a question) and sometimes positively (trying to affect group membership or taking responsibility to shift the focus of a discussion). Some exercise choice or agency by declining to take part in research or consultation.

Like adults, children show a diversity of views about each of the main research methods, some children emphasizing the advantages and some the disadvantages (Borland et al., 2001; Punch, 2002). Moreover, children may produce the same reason for favouring different methods. In the study by Punch (2002), preference for either a group or an individual interview was explained in terms of the experience being 'less embarrassing'. These were linked to ideas about sociability and privacy. Not only do children produce a range of opinions about the research or consultation process and different methods, but many also articulate the importance of attending to variations among children in deciding on the most suitable approach. Children themselves recognize the significance of diversity. They acknowledge that methods of communication are viewed differently by different children, e.g. on the basis of temperament or literacy skills.

Thus the main implications for (adult) researchers (see Table 1) are not about children's consensual views about different approaches since like adults they hold varied opinions. Rather, core principles may be derived from what children say, which are arguably as applicable to everyday life as research.

Children tend to judge methods of research and consultation not simply from a self-oriented view of personal preference, although that is a consideration (e.g. preferring methods that are more fun or take up less of their time). Some also recognize the importance of the collective input and impact, expressed in terms of fairness of access and representation. In addition, awareness is shown of others' entitlement to take part, as shown by young people who had been chosen expressing sympathy for those who were not, and sensitivity about providing information because of shyness or a desire for privacy. Thus, their responses derive as much from a social or moral commitment to others as an individualized consumer choice (see Mayall, 2002).

There is a need both to ask children and young people much more often what they think about methods used in actual and potential research and to also to build up a record of their perspectives. This will help improve

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Table 1 Some implications for (adult) researchers from what children have said

Fairness	Ensure as many types of child and viewpoint as possible are included
Effectiveness	Try to ensure that the research or consultation will benefit children
Agency	Benefit from children's ideas about the best ways to explore their worlds
Choice	Maximize the opportunities for participants to choose forms of communication and levels of involvement they prefer
Openness	Be clear to children about limitations to their participation and the effects it will have
Diversity	Use a range of methods and include all major perspectives
Satisfaction	Make the experience a comfortable one and, when appropriate, good fun
Respect	Recognize children's rights and opinions; minimize use of power

the quality and ultimately outcomes of individual studies and of the community of research and consultation activities. More importantly, perhaps, it will enable the adult–chid relationships entailed in research and consultation to be more explicitly and fully located within the theory and actuality of intergenerational relations, as well as within the context of empowerment, partnership and citizenship debates more widely (Alderson, 2001a; Beresford, 2000; Crawshaw et al., 2000; Mayall and Zeiher, 2003; Prout, 2005). In order for this to meet children's own emphasis on fair representation, the methods need to allow everyone in the relevant population a chance to be involved.

Notes

1.   For the purposes of this article, children are taken to include anyone under the age of 18, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As many children regard themselves as young people, this term is also used, but with discretion to avoid cumbersome repetition, so that where the words 'children' or 'child' appear they should be taken as including young people.

2.   Likewise, to avoid excessive repetition, this will not always be separately referenced. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations by children are taken from the parliament study.

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