

‘Research’ in early childhood settings: a pause for thought

Professor Angela Anning

For the last fifty years there have been movements to democratise the processes of doing research in the social sciences. In the 1980s *action research* within British educational contexts was perceived to be a tool (essentially spirals of planning, acting, reflecting and refining) by which practitioners could strive to improve practice. There was a broader understanding within the United States of America of action research as a tool for bringing about social change. The idea of *participatory research* was developed as an alternative; an attempt to demystify research and open it up to ‘ordinary people’. In this approach, the role of researchers is to find ways to work alongside those who are experiencing, for example, the realities of poverty or disabilities and give ‘voice’ to individuals or communities perceived as ‘powerless’ within conventional research traditions. A more extreme approach is *emancipatory research*. The premise is to work directly alongside participants in the research process, attempting to operate outside the existing power relationships and structures of social relations, to give voice to the participants. All these approaches have been influential in attempts to listen to the voices of children and young people and marginalised groups in our society and, therefore, of immediate relevance to many professionals working in early childhood settings.

At the same time as these research paradigms were shifting and changing, professionals in training were encouraged to study, understand and critique both research methods and the findings of research projects. More significantly, students at school and professionals in training have been expected to undertake their own research projects in ‘real world’ contexts. The well-intentioned purpose is to engage learners directly in a focus of inquiry which may have practical applications and which will increase their motivation to learn. Students collect evidence, interpret what they hear and see, attempt to make sense of data from a specific context and often (perhaps unwisely) to generalise. It is common place now for those working with children, young people and families to be approached by a range of enthusiastic, but inexperienced, potential ‘researchers’ (including members of their own staff teams) to be allowed access to their settings and clients to ‘do a research project’.

Managers will ask for evidence of ethical approval for such projects; but may be unsure of how robust that evidence is. Ethical frameworks are mostly discipline specific: psychology, sociology and medicine. Yet many ‘research projects’ in early childhood settings cross traditional disciplinary boundaries; and gaining ethical approval may be nodded through by

institutional committees responsible for training students and with a vested interest in them gaining qualifications. This begs the question of how well prepared in the methodologies of distinct disciplines of social science research – but more importantly the complexities of the ethical issues arising from research in the ‘real world’ – are many of those undertaking ‘research’ in our settings?

Let us look at the case of the inexperienced ‘outsider’ asking for permission to do some ‘research’ with (perhaps vulnerable) children or families in your settings. Let us take it for granted that they have CRB clearance and that you have asked them for evidence of their proposed projects having been vetted for ethical approval. The first pause for thought must be how trustworthy is the person asking for permission to access young children and their families in your workplace. Your tests must be both in terms of their own personal integrity, but also how well you believe the agency responsible for their training has prepared them robustly for research activities. Have you questioned them about their grasp of the paramount importance of confidentiality in observing, listening to and reporting on the behaviours and utterances of young children and their parents? In particular, do they understand the sensitivity of using cameras and caution about what they write down in their notebooks? Have you observed them interacting with children and parents in your setting? Despite their best intentions, they are likely to be inexperienced in dialogue with children and interviewing adults and may come across, particularly to more vulnerable children and adults, as obtrusive and, at worst, insensitive. It is your responsibility as a professional to protect from discomfort the children and families you serve. How seriously are you taking this responsibility? And how seriously has the researcher taken the challenges of gaining informed consent? Despite the rhetoric of having done so, they may not be aware of how difficult this is to achieve. Even the most experienced researchers are challenged by gaining informed consent and, by remaining sensitive at all times, to know when *not* to pursue data gathering from vulnerable children and adults.

Now let us think about the case of ‘insiders’ (including perhaps yourself) seeking permission to ‘research’ into aspects of service delivery or user perspectives in your setting? The first pause for thought must be to reflect on potential conflicts between a *professional’s role* as serving the needs of their communities and a *researcher’s role* as ‘objectifying’ the objects of their enquiry. Can these really be reconciled in a morally and ethically defensible way? Will becoming a ‘researcher’ (perhaps only involving a small number of those for whom you or a member of your staff have overall professional responsibility) influence your professional relationships with them? Will you get closer to some? Or feel ambivalent about others about whom you now have greater knowledge? In interpreting data do you and your staff have the breadth of experience to remain non-judgemental about different patterns of child-rearing

and the diversity of cultural/religious/faith values and beliefs to which you may be exposed? And, finally, how will you or members of your staff use the interpretations you generate of how human beings in your professional world behave and live their lives? Who else (other than a tutor perhaps) will hear about what you have found out? And how will you protect the anonymity of those young children and vulnerable adults who have granted you access to them? The brutal fact is that your position as a professional gives you power over your community; but is it justifiable to use this power as a researcher as well without serious thought and preparation?

My argument is not to deny the importance of professionals inquiring into their own practices. We know that one of the most powerful drivers for improving practice is when a community is learning together. A radical workplace may even commission lines of inquiry, like a laboratory, in order to feed what they have learned back into their daily activities. Nor do I want to underestimate the power of insights gained from professionals studying theoretical perspectives and the outcomes of robust research on what may have become 'taken for granted' systems, protocols, behaviours and activities in the workplace. But what I am suggesting is that the rapid expansion of small scale 'research projects', driven by the imperatives of upgrading the workforce in children's services and of encouraging pupils in school to engage with real world problems, may be putting both practitioners and the families for whom they have professional responsibility under unwarranted pressure.

I want to suggest that professionals set a limit to the number of projects permitted in their settings on an annual basis. It may be that they decide only to accept or commission projects that directly feed into their institutional development plan in a meaningful way and over which they have control – both of the processes and outcomes of projects. Above all, I want to emphasise how important it is that they safeguard the vulnerable members of their communities from inappropriate and ill-informed 'projects'. This will require us all to step back from the rush to accommodate the 'research' industry and to reframe on our prime responsibility as professionals.

Do you agree with Angela Anning's views about research practices and young children? Might what is being suggested limit what most serious researchers need to do in their studies? How do we retain the value and importance of research to early childhood practices whilst maintaining safeguards for vulnerable groups?

As usual, any responses should be sent to j.moyles@ntlworld.com