Writing Up Research Involving Child Participants: some Reflections by Ian, aged 5 years

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Introduction

As part of my MA in Early Childhood Studies, I interviewed a range of children and parents about their sweet eating behaviours. In this paper, I aim to explore some of the observations made by Ian, age 5 years, on the writing up of my dissertation. His concerns over time, in particular 'finishing', are illuminating. I conclude the paper by suggesting that an area that is rarely explored in the literature around research methods is discussing the writing up process with the participants – especially if they are young children. Ian's observations are not only of interest to the area of research methods, but have implications for the ways in which practitioners support children's writing development.

Approaches to Research Involving Children

Traditionally, children were viewed as objects, as opposed to subjects or participants, in the research process (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). In part, this was due to prevailing views of children as being unable to participate fully in research owing to their developmental immaturity (James *et al.* 1998). This view was also affected by the hierarchical approach to research with children, in which the researcher, always an adult, was necessarily seen as 'expert'. More recent research has looked at the notion of the child as being an expert on their own life, as well as having an important perspective on their life as lived now, as opposed to what they may become (Alldred 1998; Mayall 2002).

This paper's discussion around a child's interest in the writing up of my dissertation fits into such thinking in that it values the child's perspective. But more than this, it values the child's perspective on the researcher's job of writing up as opposed to earlier stages in the research process, such as data collection – an area, I suggest, that is less often explored.

Whilst there is a wealth of literature around research involving children (for instance Grieg and Taylor 1999), less well documented is the way that adult-researchers might share the writing up process with child participants. What follows now, are some reflections on the writing up of my

own piece of research – more particularly, I document the observations made by Ian, one of the participants.

The Research

The piece of research in which I engaged was examining the narratives of parents and children around sweets. I conducted interviews with six families known to me prior to the research, consisting of ten adults and twelve children between the ages of two and a half and eleven years.

For the purposes of this paper, I explore the observations Ian, aged five years, made about the writing up of the dissertation. Throughout, he appeared to be a keen observer of the process and finished product, despite his parents' assertion that he disliked writing and his own comment that "Writing is boring. We have to do it every morning."

Writing up my Dissertation: Ian's observations

During my interviews with Ian around sweet eating, he became very interested in what the finished dissertation would look like. I had explained to all the participants – child and adult – what was going to happen to all the notes and tape recordings I was making. Whilst most participants seemed pleased to know what was going to happen to their narratives, Ian became interested in how I was physically going to write them up.

Initially, Ian's concern was over the number of words that I was required to write. When I said that I was going to be writing around 20,000 words, he seemed amazed. He said that he would never be able to write such an amount because it would take him too much time. When I stated that I had many months to complete the work, again he was astounded.

> "My teacher says you have to finish your work on the same day or you're in
> trouble. Sometimes you have to stay in and miss your playtime if you haven't
> finished. You're never allowed to do one bit of work for such a long time."

Even when I pointed out that, given the number of words required, as well as the amount of editing I would have to do (described to him as 'changing'), I would need months to do it, Ian was still concerned with time. Our discussion led me to thinking that he rarely seemed to get the opportunity to work on a piece of writing for an extended period. – something I will discuss later. I pointed out that I would have to hand in draft copies to my supervising tutor in order to obtain her

comments and that I had a deadline date in which to send a draft findings chapter. This seemed to be something to which Ian could relate. He was concerned with knowing what punishments would befall me if my tutor did not receive my work on time. Indeed, he seemed to delight in thinking of a few himself!

He also pondered over how I would know when I had finished the dissertation. I recall saying that I might enjoy it so much that even when I had handed the work in, I would want to continue studying the same area. In this sense, I might never finish. As I have just finished writing an initial PHD proposal, still looking at the area of children and food, this seems especially poignant. For Ian, though, the concept of 'never really finishing' seemed perplexing.

A few months after this conversation, Ian spontaneously asked me whether I had finished doing my writing, to which I replied that I had written too many words (I was 5000 words over the limit). This prompted another discussion around writing in which his advice was to rub the extra words out until I got to the required number of words – a mathematical solution to the problem.

Later still, when I showed him the finished, bound dissertation as well as what the markers had said about it, he was fascinated by the amount of written feedback I received.

> "It looks like a real book…When you do good work in my class you get a tick –
> you don't get lots of writing (*feedback*) like *you* get. Mrs A…. only says "good" if
> she likes your work."

I explained some of the comments that tutors had written and Ian was surprised to see that I had been given points to reflect on further. His astonishment seemed to centre on how adults might still have areas to work on with their writing.

Finally here, over two years after handing in the dissertation, Ian and his family came over for lunch and one of the first things he asked was that I show him where I had written about him in the dissertation, saying "Show me where I am in the book". It was his persistent interest that prompted me to write this paper.

Discussion

Ian's concerns over time and 'finishing' and what might happen if I did not finish, seem indicative of the values we are inculcating into children with the pre-occupation with time in the literacy and

numeracy hours, as part of the respective strategies (DFEE 1998; DFEE 1999). His concerns also reflect anxieties over broader timetabling issues. Bruce (1991) discusses the importance of children being able to 'wallow' in thoughts and ideas in play. In working on my MA, I felt privileged in being able to wallow in my own thoughts and reflections, particularly with regards to the dissertation. Yet Ian's comments seem to suggest that schooling, for him, is not a space given to such 'luxuries', despite the connection between this and what could be described as 'deep learning'.

In bringing our discussions to the public arena, I am not suggesting that at the age of five, Ian should be fully proficient in drafting and editing. I am, however, saddened by his view of writing as a technical exercise to be got through in measured time, with punishments in place if it is not. Whitehead (1997) talks about how writing can refer to both physical and psychological processes, and that if the final written product is over-emphasised, it may detract from the process of writing and the broader development of thinking skills. More broadly, MacNaughton and Williams (1998) argue that children need time for wondering and exploring in early childhood programmes, and that they should be permitted to finish activities in their own time, not within the confines of a time limit. This seems to echo Duckworth's (1996: 80) call for 'time for confusion'.

In addition, our discussions made me reflect on the extent to which adults talk to young children about the writing that they do. How often had I made children aware of the amount of writing I had to do when I was a nursery nurse and later, teacher? How often did I make explicit to children when, where and why I was writing about them and what I was saying? On one level Whitehead (1997) suggests that adults can play a vital role in young children's literacy development by acting as role-models, thus arousing a desire to write. Yet the implications of my discussion suggest much more than this, not least a rethink about information sharing with children in early years practice and the underpinning issues of power that this raises.

But it is not just classroom practice to which Ian's comments are pertinent. In terms of researching children's perspectives, how often do researchers make explicit the writing in which they are engaged? Maybe other children would be interested in this too. Furthermore, the research process itself may offer an opportunity for adults to share with children the idea that they too are learners, who receive feedback on their work. This might break down the supposed polarities of researcher/participant, teacher/pupil, expert/novice, often implicit in the notion of adulthood and childhood and traditional forms of research (Morrow and Richards 1996; Alldred 1998).

Conclusion

To conclude, I would suggest that by discussing the writing up process, children have an opportunity to revisit and talk about aspects of the research that interest *them*. But more than this, they can be given the opportunity to see adults involved in the process of writing as well as receiving feedback on this in order that they can improve their work. In this example from my own experience, Ian saw me reflecting on the difficulties I was having editing my work, as well as the pleasure I had in having the time to 'wallow' in writing it up. I hope that at some point in his school career, Ian, and other children seemingly disaffected by writing, will have this time in their own work too.

Do Debbie's views parallel your own experiences with children? How can more time be created for children to experience writing as a pleasure rather than a chore? How often do children in your setting see adults engaged in writing? Any ideas/thoughts/comments gratefully received by Janet Moyles (j.moyles@ntlworld.com)

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