

Conducting Research with Children and Adolescents

4

Design, Methods and Empirical Cases

Julie Tinson

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 Design and setting by P.K. McBride

4 Keeping the Children and Adolescents Engaged

Objectives

- To establish different learning styles and how these may influence the way in which children engage with research
- To identify a variety of techniques that can be employed in different situations to engage the children with whom you are researching
- To explore the merits of using engaging techniques and to consider the age and development of the young people when employing these approaches
- To discuss the views of young people in relation to research methods and techniques

Introduction

The previous chapters considered designing and developing an ethical approach to researching with children. Having chosen the method that will be employed for the research project (e.g. creative groups), this chapter now suggests a variety of techniques that can be used to engage the young people you are researching with. This chapter contains examples of innovative methods of researching with children and also provides suggestions from 'experts' in different disciplines (as well as young people themselves) as to how best to research with children.

Preparing Tasks

Having gained access, obtained consent and chosen a research method(s) the researcher should carefully consider the best ways in which to keep the children they are researching with engaged during the project. As previously noted, younger children (ages 8-11) are likely to have a shorter attention span in comparison with their older counterparts (young people aged 11+ years) and as such it is important to engage younger and older children in different ways. It is often useful to consider more than one technique for younger children as they are likely to be less reflective and can complete any tasks that are set for them more quickly than older children. Older children (11+ years) are in the reflective stage of socialisation (Roedder John, 1999) and as such can take longer to reflect on or discuss material they are presented with or they have created. There is no absolute guide as to how long a task will last because this will depend on the nature of the topic (e.g. children may be more comfortable talking about celebrities than they will be about why smoking is bad for their health).

The timing of the task might also depend on the research method and sampling approach (e.g. the size of the creative group and the group dynamics). This is because if the creative group is small and the group is made up of 'quiet' children the task will be completed in a shorter time. There are ways in which you can overcome these issues including piloting or practising the tasks with a smaller number of children before conducting the actual study. This has a number of benefits as the researcher is able to see what the children enjoy, how the tasks might need to be adapted and what the levels of comprehension are relative to what the children are being asked to consider. Additionally you can ask the gatekeeper to consider what you propose and ask their advice on how long they think the task will take.

Learning Styles

What type of tasks would be most appealing to the young people you are researching with? Dunn, Dunn and Price (1984) illustrate the preferences individuals have for visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning (known as the VAK model). These principles on the way in which children learn could also be useful for the way in which the researcher can engage with children during the research project.

If children are visual learners they like to read a piece of narrative or text or can interpret diagrams. Auditory learners like to listen and discuss concepts. Kinaesthetic learners prefer to find out by 'doing': they like moving, manipulating, touching. It is likely that whilst children may have a preference for a particular type of VAK approach, a mixture of these approaches will be most beneficial to maintain interest amongst individuals or groups. Just as teachers have to acknowledge and address preferred styles of learning, the researcher has to understand these different approaches to communicating (and importantly, to being understood). For this reason, a range of research approaches may be most beneficial for the children you are researching with. A variety of activities within

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