REVIEW ESSAY
RESEARCHING CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVES: A BOOK REVIEW
TEXTUALISED BY LIAM’S SORTING DRAWING

JULIANNE MOSS

University of Tasmania

Researching Children’s Perspectives
ISBN 0 335 20280 2 (hbk) 0 335 20279 9 (pbk)

Opening

In this review I will use visual and literary text to present an understanding of Researching Children’s Perspectives, a collection edited by Ann Lewis and Geoff Lindsay (2000). My review is written in narrative form and uses the disjuncture of a five-year-old child’s ‘sorting drawing’ as an illustration of why the field of the book, children’s perspectives, is significant for educational research. At the outset I will assert that the book is a worthwhile text for the institutional library and office shelves of researchers in education. The book offers important practical and theoretical considerations in a friendly text. The reader can select accounts from the theoretical and conceptual issues presented in part one and examples of practical applications in part two. In reading the book, although it may not have been a deliberate intention of the authors, the freedom to select from either section of the text adds to the book’s appeal. In the conclusion to my review I will raise some of the methodological silences I locate in the text.
The illustration and the description of the event comes from a preparatory classroom in an urban Tasmanian primary school. The children, aged five to five and a half years gathered after recess break in front of the easel. After the post 'little lunch' settling routine, the children were introduced to a sorting and classification activity. The task was to illustrate their number understanding and mathematical learning through a 'sorting drawing'. The children quickly prepared themselves for the task. Two girls moved a trolley to the centre of the room. The trolley laden with baskets of sorting attributes—unifix cubes, beer bottle tops, assorted coloured crayons, buttons, hand coloured popsicle sticks, gum nuts, shells, attribute blocks, connect-o-cubes, etc.—was rapidly descended upon by the young mathematicians. The children moved to clear floor spaces or shared tables, collecting large sheets of paper and pencils or textas to begin the integrated task.

Working as a co-teacher with the classroom teacher, I moved around the room. After circulating the class once, I stopped at a table of three boys. I knelt beside Liam. Gazing around the table and viewing the work of the other two boys, I initially saw that Liam had not commenced the task. Drawn on Liam's
paper was a detailed creature, an image (see right hand side of illustration) that I later learned to be an ‘extraterrestrial’ being. Evidence of the outcome, ‘1.3 Answers mathematical questions by acting out a story, showing it with objects or pictures, or by trial and error’ (Mathematics—A Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools, p. 23) appeared to be engaging Liam with the latter expectation rather than the teacher’s outcome, ‘1.11 Counts and estimates collections, orders two or more collections, and orders things within collections’ (Mathematics—A Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools, p. 26).

I asked Liam if he could tell me about his sorting drawing. My reading was that perhaps inside the ‘extraterrestrial’ being was a hidden story. He raised his eyes at me and, with despair, pointed to the connect-o-cubes that were positioned toward the top left hand of the paper. The blocks at this point were ungraphed and without the supporting text that now appears in the illustration. Liam had sorted and sequenced his blocks into tall (2 ot), medium and small.

After spending some time with Liam I asked whether Mr. Matthews, his teacher, would understand his sorting drawing when it was time to pack up. How would he explain his drawing to the children when it was sharing time? I left Liam and moved to another child. I offered no further prompts. Revisiting the group some ten minutes later I found the completed illustration—the drawing with the words TaLu, MEDleM and SMOL written beside the towers of cubes, surrounded by another more detailed ‘extraterrestrial’ being! Liam had also demonstrated he understood outcome 1.19 ‘Directly compares and orders “straight” lengths and capacities of two containers, including by repeating and counting units’ (Mathematics—A Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools, p. 30). Together the graphed connect-o-cubes and the ‘extraterrestrial’ beings with their intricate construction of segmented parts and internal workings had evidenced other thinking than the collection task that Liam was being asked to do.

This short story reminds me how important it is for teachers and researchers to engage the perspective of children in the teaching and research processes. What would have been the endpoint of Liam’s sorting drawing if there had been no talk between us, if I had not seen the moment as a ‘data stc...’ (Lather and Smithies 1997, p. 34) or I had ignored the multidimensional social context in which the sorting drawing arose? To this end, the central thesis of Lewis and Lindsay’s (2000) collection—that educational research should engage social science methods in a way that has at its centre respect for persons, the social context and the capacity of children to act as researchers for researchers—is an important contribution to the literature.

The book is written in two distinct parts. The main body of the text is around two hundred pages and offers the reader a broad coverage of social science
research method. Approximately one third of the text is devoted to theoretical and conceptual issues. The remaining two thirds of the text provides a rich display of practical applications of studies and illuminates the diversity of method, both qualitative and quantitative produced by British researchers mainly located at the University of Warwick. I will focus on part two, practical applications, to elaborate on the contents of the book.

**Table of contents: Part two**

Maureen Winn Oakley in the chapter ‘Children and young people and care proceeding’ outlines her approach to a pilot study and subsequent fieldwork. She develops a carefully constructed account of her role as fieldwork participant, observer, interviewer, document collector and dialogical participant in the research process. Significantly, she also records methods that she rejected given the sensitivity of the context in which she was working.

Caroline Jones and Jane Tannock provide a reflexive account of the issues of death and bereavement. Jones and Tannock alert researchers to the depth of issues that may confront the researcher in these settings—ethical issues, issues of access, consent and confidentiality. Raising the issues of the researchers’ emotional baggage that may criss-cross a study without warning, they highlight the high stakes of research of this nature.

Amanda Begley, Tina Betheridge, and Debra Costley focus their interests on particular groups of children described as having learning difficulties—including children with Down Syndrome. These studies broadly operate with the traditions of the special education knowledge tradition and present methods that are familiar to readers of this field of study. The studies do offer some fresh dimensions to the field, but disappointingly do not attempt to wrestle with ‘bad-mouthing’ (Corbett 1996, p. 1)—an oppressive power of the language that constitutes special needs education.

In what I believe is one of the most refined methodological sequences in the text, Jo Crozier and ‘Tracy’, the key character in the research narrative, retell the experience of falling out of school. Crozier uses a life history approach to the gathering and telling of the story. Tracy’s voice as young woman is refracted through the social event method deployed in the study. Crozier has achieved for Tracy an opportunity to tell her story, but in her retelling has offered researchers and teachers a way to hear stories of their own, particularly stories about the troubling issue of school exclusion.

Simon Warren in his chapter, ‘Let’s do it properly: inviting children to be researchers’, presents a detailed problematic account of the ethnographic experience. He wrestles with the dichotomy between his research
problem—gender identity in the primary school classroom—and his research method, ethnography. He outlines the tensions that arise when ethnography is used as a mirror of the objective/subjective dualism that gives much research a masculinist imperative. As Warren writes:

The distinction between an envisioned and an interpreted reality no longer holds up. Yet, in involving children as researchers, we often attempt to invoke such a distinction. The frameworks that make possible this way of seeing are veiled, hidden, and forced into the background (p. 132).

Eleanor Nesbitt provides a detailed model of ethnography in her study which investigates 8 to 13-year-olds’ perspectives on their experience of religion. The appended interview schedule is one of the five examples of interview schedules and/or scales that are included in this text. For beginning and experienced researchers, the adding of these examples extends the way that I may use and recommend the text.

Alan France, Gill Bendelow and Simon Williams describe their approach to understanding childhood and youth as one which puts the child or young person at the centre of the research. Their account of using ‘grounded theory’, drawing from the writings of Glaser and Strauss (1967), argues that theory is generated from the data in the process of analysis. ‘Theory, in other words should not be the driving force to conceptualising the lives of children and young people; rather it should emerge from the data under investigation’ (p. 151). Their research account also highlights the ethics of practice and the tensions that occur and reoccur in implementing research within schools.

The methodological (re)orientation of the book

While Researching Children’s Perspectives offers and opens out multiple understandings of the research process, the overview—the final summing up of the text—returns to safe ground in relation to decisions the researcher takes in the methodological finger-printing of the research process. I raise this issue because the text includes a number of works that refer to studies of students with disabilities or groups of students who are at risk of exclusion from school systems. The final summing up of the text leaves the reader locked into a focus on method rather than oriented to an explication (and further exploration) of the diversity of methodological orientations that the book has opened out. The issues of ethics, the power relationships of juxtaposing children’s voices with adult presences, sociological perspectives, psychological dimensions, and issues of identity: what story of education research is this?
Recent research and commentary by researchers who undertake to work for rather than against oppressed groups is the subject of deliberation and debate in the field of inclusive schooling/education and ethnography (Allan 1999, Lather & Smithies 1997, Slee 1997). The need for researchers to make their methodological positions explicit, and the partiality of their accounts is well recognised in the literature (Booth & Ainscow 1998, Haraway 1991, Slee 1997). Some writers in Researching Children's Perspectives have taken this stance; others, however, have maintained the safe positioning of established voices. Researchers perhaps need to be alert to the 'romantic aspirations about giving voice to the voiceless' (Lather 1996, p. 15). Enabling children to be participants in the research process is more than simply listening or hearing, or positioning children as the data gatherers. Lewis and Lindsay indicate in the conclusion of their text how method choice is ultimately overridden by ideology:

Choice of method will be influenced by the view of the research held by the researcher but we consider ideology as more relevant to the choice of research study than to choice of method (p. 192).

The final section of the book returns to the methods presented in the book, rather than methodology. While the final pages are a useful summing up of the text, it leaves me wondering—rather like the moment when I drew myself close to Liam, making my first observation of the 'extraterrestrial' being. Unfortunately I cannot engage with the editors other than through my written text, but I would like to ask from the parting lines of the text what are the 'right questions' of research that they assert we ought to ask?

It is our task as researchers, from both practical and ethical considerations, to ensure that we ask the right questions in our studies, those which are important, and that we conduct our research in a manner that optimises the opportunity for children's perspectives to be listened to - and heard (Lewis & Lindsay, p. 197).

Are our understandings of children best constructed as a single truth—the right question? Or are our research questions, as some of the authors in the text have asserted, better understood by modeling and understanding how power works for oppressed groups, where as researchers we construct 'catalytic validity' (Lather 1991, p. 68) or 'local validity' (Schurich 1997, p. 88) rather than a reliance on the reliability and validity of research method?
Notes

Catalytic validity is described as 'the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses and engages participants in what Friere calls 'conscientisation', knowing reality in order to better transform it' (Lather 1986 in Scheurich 1997, p. 83). More simply, catalytic validity is the degree to which the research empowers and emancipates the research subjects (Scheurich 1997, p. 83).

Scheurich (1997, p. 88), cites the difficulties in making 'new imageries of validity', 'one possible alternative is that this difference can be achieved through dialogue and collaboration between researcher and other...'. Ellisworth (1989) argues for local knowing, local validity and local choices.

References