Children and young people in dialogue with researchers to create connections in the community and the classroom

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Introduction

While our (the present authors') backgrounds and research are different in discipline and emphasis, we share a belief that children and young people themselves are the best placed to inform an understanding of their own issues and problems, and to educate those of us who see our role as social worker or teacher. We begin from the premise that "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people" (Freire 1970).

Understanding concepts from the perspective of the learner is a crucial but often overlooked notion in education. Satchwell has examined children's understanding of punctuation (1998); their concepts of climate change (2013; 2016); and their communication about physical pain (2015). Although these subjects may seem disparate in nature, the fundamental importance of recognizing the child's perspective remains central. Drawing on some data from the punctuation project, we argue that children's concepts are based in a logic which is not always identified or acknowledged by adults, and therefore the children's perspective is not always taken into account when designing the curriculum.

Similarly, understanding the concept of children's rights from children's perspectives can inform policy-makers' and practitioners' understanding of how services should be delivered. Work carried out by Larkins with disabled young people

(and others) illustrates how children's perspectives on social justice challenge neo-liberal welfare reform. Based on Freire's approach and inspired by Butler (2009:15), this research uses 'words, ideas, conditions, and habits' central to children's experiences of rights and citizenship, then reflects these generative words and themes back to children as problems to reflect and act on through critical dialogue (e.g. Larkins 2011, Larkins et al 2013).

The two authors of this chapter have recently come together to research a marginalized community comprising people in receipt of social and welfare services who are frequently negatively portrayed by the media. Our research, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, aims to give children and young people in and outside of those families the space and facility to share their stories, to build connections between the communities they inhabit and to challenge how they are stereotyped.

For the purposes of this chapter, we begin by considering some examples of how we have come to an **understanding *of*** children's perspectives, and continue with thinking about how we have applied this in deepening **understanding *from*** children's perspectives in the application of research to action.

Understanding *of* children's perspectives

For learning to occur, and for appropriate collaborative action to take place, we agree with the Freirean notion that one should begin where the learner is, not where the educator wants them to be. And in order to see where the learner is, we need to understand their perspective on the issue at hand. Methods for gaining access to

children's thought processes are notoriously problematic, as Fine and Sandstrom recognized:

> "Discovering what children 'really' know may be almost as difficult as learning what our pet kitten really knows; we can't trust or quite understand the sounds they make" (1988, p.47),

a sentiment recently echoed by a student helper on a project attempting to understand children's language in relation to pain (Carter et al, 2015):

> "It must be like being a vet, being a doctor for children – how are you supposed to know what they mean?"

Methodological developments since the 1980s have, however, shown there are a wide range of ways in which children can reliably inform researchers of their perspectives (Punch 2002). The difficulty then may be adults' capacity to hear and understand rather than children's capacity to express their views.

To address this difficulty, a research project investigating children's concepts of punctuation used an ethnographic approach employing participant observation over two years in primary school classrooms. During this time, through observing and recording teachers' ways of talking about and instructing in punctuation, and talking and listening to children and observing them as they wrote and discussed punctuation, it was possible to discern: (1) how children interpreted teachers' instructions; and (2) how children developed their own understanding of how punctuation works. By

following the children over two years, it was possible to see how this understanding changed and evolved over time.

If we take the time and trouble to talk – and more importantly to listen - to children about their concepts, we can find it increasingly difficult to answer the questions such dialogue provokes. If we want to avoid power-imbued and unhelpful answers like 'Because it is', or 'Because I say so', children's questions make it pertinent to interrogate our own acceptance of the way things are. In the case of punctuation, it becomes important to investigate the provenance of our inherited writing system. While some adults may perceive the use of full stops, question marks, and so on to be 'obvious' and their misuse 'lazy' or 'illiterate', children (and indeed many adults) are often working hard to make sense of an apparently arbitrary and baffling set of conventions.

For example, a child asked why an exclamation mark is not followed by a full stop, whereas speech marks require a full stop as well – and deciding whether the full stop goes before or after the speech marks presents an additional challenge. A teacher during the research study explained to her class: "You must always use a capital letter for your name, and a capital 'I' for yourself, because you are *very important*." Later, when a 6-year-old boy was asked why he had not used capitals in this way, he said, "Well, I'm not very important." Were he writing in French or German, of course, there would be no such requirement to capitalize the first person pronoun – '*je*' or '*ich*' – and, neither, incidentally, for the first person object pronoun in English – 'me'. Surely it is rather impolite to capitalize 'I' but not 'you, in the same way that we are told it is bad manners to put oneself first in 'me and you', rather than taking the secondary position in 'you and I'. Such arbitrary conventions can be mystifying for a child encountering them for the first time.

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Freire articulates the importance for the learner to know the history of that which they are learning:

"Technical training .... [necessitates] the right to know the 'why' of the technical procedure itself. The worker has the right to know the historical origins of the technology in question" (Freire 1996, p.131).

For punctuation, the history is long and complex, and like other aspects of our language such as the notorious English spelling anomalies of 'bough', 'cough', and 'through', cannot be explained according to simple rules. While we may not feel a complete linguistic history for school children is necessary, we do need to acknowledge that language is a changing phenomenon, and our current punctuation conventions are required for certain kinds of writing, but they are neither obvious nor clear. Children's concepts can help us to challenge our own assumptions about the status quo, and by extrapolation, can even make us consider what is 'right' or 'wrong'. We consider punctuation to abide within binaries of correct or incorrect, but children's perspectives make us see that there are alternatives. Later we discuss how such possibilities can be applied in the contexts of children's rights and the community.

Further examples from the punctuation project highlight the shortcomings of our attempts to understand children's perspectives. When analyzing the writing of children in isolation from the context in which it was produced, we are in danger of applying a deficit model regarding their knowledge and misinterpreting their reasoning. As John Dewey said:

"As long as we confine our gaze to what the child here and now puts forth, we are confused and misled. We cannot read its meaning."

(Dewey, 1902)

It was only through the use of detailed participant observation that it was possible to explain why a child continually wrote about a canine book character as 'Breakspear?' with the name followed by a question mark even in mid-sentence, as in 'Breakspear? wanted to help Mrs Armitage'. The child had copied the word from a display on the wall, where the character's name came at the end of a question. The child had inferred that the question mark was an integral part of the name: indeed, research has shown that at an early age many children do not distinguish between letters, numbers and symbols (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982). Such occurrences show that, without an understanding of the context, we are in danger of making assumptions about children's knowledge. While the use of a question mark in this way is 'incorrect' and constitutes an 'error' in the child's writing, the revelation that there is a perfectly good reason behind its use makes us reconsider our notion of the child as a passive learner of skills. This child is constructing his own sense of how punctuation works, predicated on the belief that the teacher's writing on the wall is an exemplary text. All the examples of children's writing collected during this project demonstrated beliefs and a form of logic that could be justified – but only with a knowledge of the context in which they were produced.

Understanding *from* children's perspectives

So, we have seen that some concepts are hard for adults to explain and that based on their own experiences and explanations they have heard, children can give

explanations of grammatical rules that have a contextual logic which can challenge adults' understandings. The second study considered in this chapter utilized children's capacity to provide challenging logic and explanations to a different context – disabled children's experience of rights and low income. This study, funded by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, sought to apply Freire's (1970) suggestion that the process of re-creating knowledge involves enabling people to recognise the causes of their oppression through action and dialogue and that the knowledge created through this process can provide critical insights to others seeking to challenge oppression.

The study (Larkins et al 2013) involved a core group of 11 disabled children and young people who acted as young researchers throughout the study. They identified generative words and phrases related to disabled children's experience of rights and low incomes. Rather than existing full or simplified international rights conventions such as the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) they developed their own definitions of rights in discussion with adult advisors (see Larkins et al 2015 for details). They reflected on their own and other young people's experiences of these rights by talking about their own experiences and hearing stories from the research conducted with other young people and families (by adult researchers). Through this process the young researchers provided explanations of the barriers to disabled children's rights, the causes of these and recommended solutions.

When reflecting on other disabled children's experiences they widened their understanding of the difficulties young people faced. For example, they learned that

one young person had experienced bullying to the extent of being thrown to the floor from his wheelchair and that his mother had consequently kept him out of school only to be faced with a legal reprimand. In their research reports and video, they highlighted this story as an extreme case of the injustice that they sometimes experienced when their own impairments led to bullying or misunderstanding from teachers and fellow pupils. The attention they gave to this issue challenged some of the adults on the research team who had perhaps become desensitised to this kind of injustice, due to the recurrence of similar reports in previous research.

When exploring the infringements of disabled children's rights in low income contexts their explanations revealed specific understandings of causes and barriers. For example, a parent whose son, Joe, needed single storey accommodation due to severe life-limiting learning and physical impairments and complex health needs, described having to move away from her extended family. She reported the poor quality of the social housing they had been moved to and the lack of support with improving it:

> "*I got no grant, no decorating materials because they said I didn't fit the criteria right, no help with cleaning, no nothing. It's full of asbestos, it had rats, which is why I've got cats. I had no money to get even any paints.*"
> (Joe's Parent)

She also described receiving support from a voluntary organisation, who built a sensory room for her son Joe, but that he could not use it as the house was so damp that she could not heat it. The young researchers identified this as an infringement of

'the right to live somewhere which has heating, lighting and keeps you protected from the damp'. And they noted one particular cause:

> *"Joe does not get to use the sensory room because his Mum cannot afford to heat it. His mum owes the heating company £2000 which she is paying off at £40 a week – it will take her until May 2022."*
> (Young Researchers)

Here then, their focus was parental income rather than the quality of social housing or lack of extended family support.

In a second example another young person, Ashleigh, had limited educational support and a lack of social activities. Ashleigh has a visual impairment and a learning disability. Her mother noted:

> *"It clearly states on the statement she should be getting one-to-one support, but I don't see sound nor sight of it basically… she doesn't seem to be getting an awful lot at the moment"*
> *(Ashleigh's Parent)*

However when the young researchers reflected on Ashleigh's life experiences they highlighted the barriers she faced to enjoyment of 'the right to meet with other people/ play/do sport/take part in activities in your local area', rather than rights to education. The young researchers identified a similar income-related barrier with regard to parental income, but noted that Ashleigh's Mum needed to work so that she could afford to give Ashleigh money to go on trips. They also asked:

"Why don't the Government read these stories about someone disabled? It

would encourage them to do better."

(Young Researcher)

When using their new understandings to make recommendations and to lobby

decision-makers in national and local government, they also suggested solutions that

challenge forms of service delivery that are currently accepted as standard. For

example, although they saw parents and parental income as an important form of

support enabling the fulfilment of children's rights to a basic standard of living and to

engagement in social activities, they advocated for greater independence for children

and especially young people. For example, they recommended:

Give children and young people more access to personal assistants to support

them to do the things they want to do and help them be more independent from

their parents. - This does not mean giving us personal budgets and us

employing them. Personal assistance should be free and provided by people

like the council.

(Young Researchers)

This recommendation challenges the expectation that young people should remain

dependent on their parents well into their twenties or sometimes even thirties. It also

challenges the trend towards lowering entitlements and the privatisation of social care

services.

These examples show that there were some similarities and differences between young researchers and the adult research participants' perspectives on the rights that they identified as important, the barriers highlighted and the solutions recommended. Whilst the young people focused on heating and leisure in these examples, they also valued rights related to education, family life, work opportunities, health and other aspects of a basic standard of living. There was some overlap with adult perspectives about the causes of difficulties, with young researchers and adult participants both focusing on parental income levels or the high costs of essential goods and services. However a division in perspectives occurred in relation to the solutions they advocated, with the young researchers having greater expectations that governmental attitudes and standardised models of service provision could and should change.

Taking this understanding forward to make connections

Learning from both of these studies confirms once again that children and young people can give logical accounts of complex concepts in diverse contexts. More significantly, however, they indicate how children and young people's perspectives can provide a much needed critique of educational and political practices. In listening to their experience and logic, adults and other young people are required to question their own understandings of the world and how it is experienced by others. We can also be inspired to unpick some of the assumptions about how education or social care should be provided. It is easier for politicians and practitioners to know what concepts like rights and money mean when they are used by children and young people – complex law and practice gets translated into meaningful everyday contexts.

Children's and adults' understanding of the world and how to reimagine it in new ways is, as Freire describes, a process of reflection, dialogue and action. In these two studies we explored dialogue in contrasting ways. In the first we attended to children's and teachers' explanations about concepts which are presumed to be shared, but about which more useful understanding can be co-constructed given reflection and dialogue. In the second study, we focused on broader stories of experience and how these were interpreted by social actors who often never met (adults and children who were researchers and research participants). In both studies, their understandings of the concepts and experiences they sought to convey were also doubtless influenced by other social actors and discourses that we do not describe above. Attending to the influence of social actors and discourses that are absent or present in the process of Conscientização (critical consciousness) is significant because it may help to understand the origins of our assumptions if we are to challenge them.

For this reason, in our next joint project, *Stories to Connect With*[1], we will be exploring the idea that accounts of experience, including oppressed people's accounts of transforming their social, educational, political or economic contexts, are assemblages of meanings. These assemblages are constructed from internal and external dialogues with other people, resources and environments. This relational world view means shifting our understanding from conceiving of things as fixed objects and bodies in distinct and delimited spaces to seeing all materials (human, social and abstract) as produced through their relationships to each other (bodies, objects and ideas) (Deleuze, 1988, p.123; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.261). We believe the notion of assemblage may be useful in enabling adult and child

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[1] Stories to Connect With: disadvantaged children creating phygital community artefacts to share their life-narratives of resilience and transformation (AHRC-funded project, 2015-2017).

researchers together to unpick the different ways in which dialogue and action towards transformation may be assembled together with material and human relationships.

The challenge then remains not simply to listen to and to learn about and from children's understandings, but also to act on these understandings to bring about reimagined forms of social justice.

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