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Methodological insights from children's accounts of everyday practices in school

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Abstract

The sociology of childhood framework is generating new approaches to researching children as competent informants of their own everyday experience. Seeing children as competent research participants contrasts much educational research that sees children as developing and seeking to attain competence and provides valuable methodological insights of home and school. Participants were children aged 7-12 years enrolled in two Brisbane schools. This paper investigates children's own accounts of their everyday practices in two Brisbane schools. It provides accounts of how children, themselves, make sense of their everyday lives and how they feel about making decisions or having decisions made for them. The paper demonstrates that negotiating various forms of adult-determined regulation and control is an important and necessary part of children's everyday lives. So too, it shows that some forms of adult regulation are more acceptable to children than others and that finding social spaces outside adult regulation is an important part of their everyday lives.

Introduction

New approaches to researching children are seeing children as competent informants of their own everyday experience. These approaches are in contrast to traditional approaches which were based largely on developmental understandings of childhood, where the child was seen as un/der-developed and as, one-day, attaining adulthood. The developmental view has been challenged in recent times to consider an alternate view, that is, of respecting children's accounts of their own everyday experience (Christensen & James, 2000; Danby, 2002; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Tobin, 1995; Waksler, 1991; 1996). This alternate view is located within the sociology of childhood framework (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 1999; 2002; 2003). It sees children, through their talk and interaction, as active participants in the construction of their own social worlds. In turn, it involves researchers respecting children as competent witnesses to their own experience (Butler, 1996; Christensen & James, 2000; Mayall, 2002). This approach contrasts much educational research as it makes children's accounts visible in research, speaking for and about children and their everyday experiences.

Children's everyday experiences are seen to be located in increasingly risky spaces (Beck, 1999; 2000). Schools, as sites for children's everyday experiences and for research into those practices, are no exception. In order to identify, manage and minimise risk, children's lives are being governed increasingly by legislation, policy and practices, developed by adults, but for children. The nature of what are seen to be risky spaces, such as schools, impacts on the everyday practices of children within those spaces, and, in turn, on the research practices within those spaces.

The research

In this study we explored the different ways that children competently experience and deal with various forms of adult-determined regulation in their everyday lives. This study, conducted in 2002, has been broadened in scope and funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (2004 – 2006) entitled “Risky spaces: Children experiencing governance across school, home and community sites”. We investigated children’s experiences from the perspective of children themselves. Studies of children using adult understandings of children’s experiences are common, but few studies understand children as competent informants of their everyday lives. In this study, we viewed children as active agents who deal competently with each other and with adults in their everyday lives. We invited children to participate in conversations, generating with the researcher versions of their lives.

We asked: What are children’s everyday experiences? How do they construct their own social spaces in everyday contexts?

The research sites for this study were two Brisbane primary schools (School A and School B). A total of twenty-nine children, ranging in age from 7 years to 12 years, participated in the study, sixteen in School A and thirteen in School B. All children who participated had the written consent from their parents to participate in the study. As well, the children themselves provided their consent by signing their name or making their special mark on the consent form. Prior to conducting the research with each participating child, the researcher reviewed the consent form with them to ensure that they still wanted to participate. The researcher reminded each participant of their right to drop out of the study

at any time without any questions being asked. Some children described this experience of providing consent as a new and positive experience in their lives, as well as a positive experience. For example, in Jacob's account, he uses the metaphor of being 'in heaven' to describe his experience of providing consent.

Jacob

R how did you feel about actually being asked if you wanted to do it or if you didn't want to do it?

J I was in heaven.

R Yeah ((laughter)) how come?

J Usually I don't get uhmm decisions about those particular things like in school.

We used informal conversations to generate children's own accounts of their everyday lives. During these conversations, the children were invited to think about and explore issues of autonomy, regulation and control. The children were also invited to mark on a time-chart their daily experiences in relation to these issues. Questions and prompts guiding the conversations and time-line activity included: Who decides what you get to do here at school? At home? At other places? What do you think about that? Think of a time when you wanted others to make a decision for you and they didn't.

The audio-recorded conversations were transcribed. The focus was upon capturing segments of the conversations that described the children's understandings of their everyday lives, as well as describing the different ways that children deal with various forms of school and home regulation. Pseudonyms were used throughout the transcriptions for the participants, as well as all other persons named.

Research findings

This study identified a number of key issues concerning how children understand and deal with various forms of adult-determined regulation and control in their everyday lives. This report offers a brief introduction to some of the key issues, and draws on children's accounts that illustrate these. The key findings are:

- negotiating various forms of adult-determined regulation and control is an important and necessary part of children's everyday lives;
- a high prevalence of adult-determined regulation and control impacts on children's everyday lives at school;
- finding social spaces outside adult regulation is an important part of children's everyday lives; and
- some forms of adult regulation are more acceptable/legitimate than others.

Each finding will be discussed in turn.

1. Negotiating various forms of adult-determined regulation and control is an important and necessary part of children's everyday lives

Close examination of the conversational data revealed the competent ways in which children participated in the activity of negotiating (with adults) the various forms of adult-determined regulation and control in their everyday lives. Children themselves described this activity of negotiating as an important and necessary part of their everyday lives. The children described a variety of resources that they competently drew upon when engaging in the activity of negotiating instances of adult-determined regulation. For example:

- introducing a particular topic (to justify or make relevant)
- drawing upon a moral order that the children recognise as one to which adults ascribe, for example, using manners
- drawing upon the wider social order of the school and community
- making operative particular attributes; for example, 'being nice' or 'being sneaky'

The following two accounts were given in response to the researcher asking, "What do you do or say to get what you want?" In both accounts, the children show how competently they were able to draw upon a variety of resources when negotiating with adults. In Candice's account below, she states that she has 'a few things' to draw upon when negotiating. Candice describes how she uses manners, "pretty pretty please," as well as how she introduces the topic of 'eating vegetables' when engaging in the activity of negotiating with her mother. Candice justifies her particular approach, explaining "Cause

Mum likes me to eat vegetables.” ‘Eating vegetables’ can be heard as a resource that Candice chooses to use because of the value assigned to it by her mother.

Candice

R What do you do or what do you say to get what you want?’

C I have a few things.

R Ah-huh

C First I say, “pretty pretty please with lots of vegetables on top”

R Ohh

C ‘Cause Mum likes me to eat vegetables

In other accounts, children explain how they structure their interactions with parents in such a way as to influence possible outcomes. In Emily’s account, she describes her way of making operative a time-frame that provides the opportunity for her mother to ‘think about it.’ Emily identifies a specific attribute, “the nicest Mummy”, and uses it to strengthen her negotiating power.

Emily

E I say “please please please with sugar on top. Mummy please you’re the nicest Mummy ”

.

.

E Ummm, I- if she says “no” for things, then I say to her “Okay. You got to think about it, right?” And then I walk off, so that she can’t say anything else to me so she has to think about it.

E ‘Cause, I always try ‘n make her think about it so she’s got long- I got longer to say that I might be having it.

Both Candice and Emily show how they knowingly participate in interactions with parents in such a way to seek support and approval of their own agendas.

2. A high prevalence of adult-determined regulation and control impacts on children’s everyday lives at school

In their accounts of adult-determined regulation, the children describe a higher prevalence of adult-determined regulation and control impacting on their everyday lives at school in comparison to home. At school, the children provided many accounts of adult-determined regulation and control whereby teacher’s decisions were regulating the children’s everyday social interactions, eating behaviours and bodily movements.

In Lola’s account, Lola describes school as a site where she doesn’t “really have many decisions” and goes on to identify ‘choosing what to eat’ as one of the few decision that she is able to make at school.

Lola

- L Uhhmm I don't really have many decisions (at) like after I've got dressed 'n done everything because then we just go to school
- R M-hmm
- L And you don't have that many decisions at school because you haft to do work
- R Right. So, would you say you had any decisions at school?
- L Uhhmm yeah. Because you can choose what you're gonna eat for morning tea and what you're gonna eat for lunch.

The implication in Lola's account is that she has no decision-making in the activities of 'work'. She refers to out-of-classroom experiences to explain the types of choices she has. In this way, children in this study were similar to those found in the work of Mayall (2002) and Christensen and James (2000), in that their autonomy and self-regulation was performed outside the school.

Children commented specifically on the ways that adults seek confirmation that regulatory measures are being adhered to. Oralee, in her account below, describes how her behaviour is subject to ongoing regulatory measures as a part of her everyday experience at school.

Oralee

- O And then (..) when I get to school I:I have t:o (...) I have to pay attention
- R Ah-hmm
(long pause while O is writing on timeline)
- R Who do you have to pay attention to?

O My teacher

.

R And how long do you have to pay attention for?

O Umm the whole time he's talking.

.

O And I have to look at him otherwise he thinks that we're not paying attention

R And do you think that's accurate? do you think that people have to look to pay attention or do you think that young people can still be paying attention without looking

R We:ll depends if they're fiddling

Here, Oralee appears to be supporting the measures that the teacher uses, although there is some resistance. It may be significant here to remember that Oralee is providing her account to another adult, and so she may feel restrained in what she can say about this teacher's actions.

3. Finding social spaces outside of adult regulation is an important part of children's everyday lives

The children provide several accounts of the ways in which they exercise agency in the face of different forms of regulation. One way is finding social spaces outside of adult regulation. An example at one school site that several children describe is the differing ways of finding a social space outside of adult-regulation. This social space is used by the children to interact with their peers. In Martin's account, he describes how 'being sneaky' is a way of finding a social space for talking with peers.

Martin

M ...it's a decision where you got to be sneaky

R ahhhh

M really sneaky actually

R if you want to talk

M Yeah, because like sometimes you get caught and (they) say "Oh what are you supposed to be doing." And you have to say "Oh, uhmm, reading." And then they say "Get to it" or something.

R Ahhh. And what sort of uhmm ways do you have of being sneaky, like how do you

M Well

R How do you do that?

M Really when some teachers are like talking, to other people and it's really loud, we just talk to each other.

Here, Martin points out that 'talking to peers' is an activity not usually considered acceptable within the classroom. However, he also shows ways that he can operate within the adult framing to pursue his own agendas.

4. Some forms of adult regulation are more acceptable/legitimate than others

In their accounts, the children show how they competently drew upon their knowledge of social orders for the purposes of understanding and making sense of the various forms of

adult-determined regulation and control impacting on their everyday lives. Some children found some forms of regulation more acceptable or legitimate than others.

In Ellie's account, she describes how her teacher makes a decision regarding which book is selected for reading to the students. The legitimacy Ellie ascribes to her teacher's decision is viewed from within a framework of what children enjoy or like.

Ellie

E and then the teacher reads a book to us, *The Shining River*. And (1.5)

R And who decided which book the teacher was going to read

E Uhhh the teacher

R Oh okay. Yep. And what do you think about that, that the teacher made that decision.

E It's okay because- it's pretty good because he like normally picks ones that we'll all enjoy. Cause if the girls chose one they might choose something that the boys don't like, and then the boys (will) probably choose a magazine or something

Ellie introduces gender as a relevant topic in this instance, suggesting that girls and boys make different judgements about what they enjoy or like. Perhaps she is also suggesting that the teacher is aware of this gender difference?

Martin provides an account of children's everyday experience of governance at the school site in relation to morning tea, whereby students "have to eat for ten minutes and then you put your hand up and then they let you go to play." Martin finds this regulation of his everyday eating and playing times as 'unfair,' suggesting that 'five minutes' eating time would be more legitimate/acceptable.

Martin

M We:ll* there's two breaks. There's morning tea, you can do like that's what you can do. That goes for half an hour but really it doesn't it goes for twenty-five minutes. And you have an hour uhmm for big lunch. So that uhmm most people like it uhmm big lunch 'cause you only have half an hour until you have to go back to school hhhh so, really, the problem is you don't get enough time in morning tea like it should actually go for half an hour

R ah-huh

M but instead you have to wait ten minutes 'cause you have to eat for ten minutes and then you put your up and you wait for ten minutes and then they let you go to play

R and what do you think about that little routine of eating for ten minutes

M I don't think I don't really like eating for ten minutes I'd put it probably five minutes

R Ah-hmm

M So you get ec- twenty-five minutes. 'cause with the hour you would only have fifty minutes to play. But then you would have fifty-five minutes to play. So m mm really it's (2.0) pretty unfair because you only have ten minutes.

For Martin, this regulation of eating time within break time is unfair. For him, break time is about maximising play time. Rather than suggesting he could monitor his own eating time, he suggests a change within the school break rules. In this way, he adheres to the way the school operates, accepting that certain adult regulation applies.

Such an account provides methodological insights into everyday social practices within a research site, in this case, the school. It demonstrates that children are stake-holding participants in schools whose accounts have a potential contribution to policy dialogue into how schools operate or should operate.

Conclusion

The methodological innovation of researching with children as competent informants of their everyday experience and of generating authentic accounts of their experience challenges the traditional educational research enterprise. Such innovation is timely given that we are living in 'new times' of endemic, global and social change (Hall, 1996; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996). The types of work and workplaces in which children today will eventually participate will change dramatically. The knowledges and skills required to perform in these new workplaces involve children becoming autonomous and self-directed learners. The core competencies with regard to school performance have also changed. A

child's ability to be self-reflective, self-regulating and self-controlling is increasingly seen to be important (Fendler, 1998; 2001). Therefore, we need to challenge the position that children are always requiring adult-determined regulation. This study has shown that children do negotiate with adults as a part of their everyday lives. Researchers are challenged to consider that children, when provided with appropriate opportunities, can make competent decisions and can self-regulate. These approaches to research open up new possibilities for research with children as reliable informants of their own experience.

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