Chapter 7

How are the Human Rights of Children Related to Research Methodology?

Harriot Beazley, Sharon Bessell, Judith Ennew and Roxana Waterson

Introduction

Adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, the CRC has now entered its third decade. By any cultural or legal yardstick, it has ‘come of age’. In this chapter, we ask what human rights mean for research with children. It is notable that even the preposition has changed – from on or about, to with. Research on and about children has a long, pre-rights history in education, psychology and history, being not only the impetus for scholarly debate, but also highly influential in shaping everything from public policies about children and families to recommended parenting styles and commercial marketing. Yet, both from a human rights perspective and within social sciences, the history of research on children is vexed. Children have usually been objects of research, with data collection aiming to advance a theoretical or policy perspective, rather than positioning children as research participants who are subjects of human rights.

In this chapter, we begin by documenting the emergence of the idea of rights-based research with children, outlining the methodology that underpins the approach. We argue that rights-based research ensures that both the process of research and the results are ethical, scientifically robust and respectful of children.

Rights-based Research with Children: The Emergence of an Idea

The research approach discussed in this chapter did not begin with the CRC, nor with earlier Declarations of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations and the United Nations. The origins were in the same year in which the drafting of the CRC was agreed by the international community (1979 being the UN International Year of the Child ['IYC']). In addition, the research that began the process was carried out for the IYC, having its roots in concern for the rights of child workers that was being expressed by UN specialist agencies (particularly the International Labour Organisation), the UN Human Rights Commission (through the Working Group on Slavery) and two of the many non-governmental human rights organisations that motivated and supported the IYC – Ford Foundation and
Anti-Slavery International (then the Anti-Slavery Society). The research on child labour that was commissioned by these two organisations had three characteristics that still typify rights-based research with children: children (in Jamaica) were asked to share their own opinions and experiences, questionnaires and interviews were not used with children, and ‘qualitative’ material from essays and drawings were analysed using the (pre-Windows version) Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, to produce statistical results from large samples (Ennew and Young 1982). This approach was later used successfully in other contexts, most notably in Peru (Ennew 1986) and the United Kingdom (Morrow 1999), inspired in part by similar innovations in South Africa (Swart 1990).

Parallel to this development, the drafting process for the CRC stimulated a more general discussion on what has, for three decades, been referred to as ‘children’s participation’ (although better thought of as children’s citizenship: Beers, Invernizzi and Milne 2006). Meanwhile, field-based practice in human geography, as well as in programming with street and working children, extended experience and skills in consulting with children (see for example Hart 1997, Cussianovich and Marquez 2002, Ratna and Reddy 2002, Liebel 2008). At the same time, academics, historians and social scientists were developing theories of ‘childhood’ as well as the methodological construction of ‘child’ as a social agent worthy of study in its own right (see for example James and Prout 1992). Nevertheless, these advances have not necessarily led to innovations in either methods or ethics for research with children (Ennew and Morrow 2002).

The impetus for the development of rights-based research with children was the submission of the first reports to the CRC Committee in 1992, and the Committee’s realisation that available data, particularly information that fell outside the conventional health-education-psychology-demography nexus, were insufficient for monitoring the CRC. This kick-started regular meetings of an informal grouping of inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, usually referred to by its members as ‘The London Process’.1 One outcome was a set of activities over a five-year period, which included analysing the methods that had been used to collect existing data (Ennew 1993, Ennew and Milne 1996), the development and testing of children-centred methods of testing data, as well as new ethical approaches, through experimental research that built the capacity both of the principal research designers and the researchers themselves, most of whom were grass-roots workers in local programmes (Boyden and Ennew 1997).

At that stage, this research could have been described as rights-motivated, rather than rights-based, and the data collected were principally ‘qualitative’ extensions of Participatory Action Research (PAR) techniques already developed for adults.

1 The meetings were hosted by Save the Children UK in their London offices and principally attended by staff of Save the Children Sweden (Rädda Barnen), UNICEF (New York and Geneva), members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Defence for Children International, Childwatch International and two consultants (Jo Boyden and Judith Ennew).

Thus, two decades after the CRC came into force, the principle that children have the right to be properly researched has been well tested in a range of contexts. The resulting approach has five key characteristics. First, it is genuinely respectful of children as partners in research. Children’s participation in research must be meaningful on their own terms, rather than on those dictated by researchers or by the strictures of funding arrangements. Second, this approach places ethics at the heart of research in practical and meaningful ways – children must engage in research voluntarily and must not be exploited through the research process. Third, research must be scientifically valid; data must be collected systematically using methods that can be justified and replicated. Fourth, analysis must be robust, where possible combining both statistical and descriptive techniques. Finally, like PAR and similar approaches, rights-based research prioritises local knowledge and expertise to produce insightful information on children’s own experiences and opinions. Through the rights-based techniques of developing robust statistical results from qualitative materials, policy makers and programme planners can confidently use the information for planning and monitoring.

The CRC and Rights-based Research with Children

Although rights are indivisible, the rights-based approach to research with children is based on an interpretation of four articles of the CRC:

- Article 3.3: Children have the right to expect the highest possible standards of services from professionals who work with them – which implies high-quality, scientific research.
- Article 12: Children have the right to express their opinions in matters concerning them.
- Article 13: Children have the right to express themselves in any way they wish – not limited to the verbal expressions used by adults.
- Article 36: Children have the right to be protected from all forms of exploitation, including being exploited through research processes and through the dissemination of information (Ennew and Plateau 2004).
Children’s Participation and Freedom of Expression in Research

Article 12, often presented (not entirely accurately) as entitling children to the right to ‘participate’, is perhaps the most controversial, most influential and most discussed article of the CRC (Beers, Invernizzi and Milne 2006). It is not, of course, an innovation because, as human beings, children have had the right to participate since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Yet the CRC drew attention to this right for human beings who are denied franchise on grounds of age (Franklin 2002), and emphasised the importance of the right of children to express opinions on matters concerning them. Much of the attention given to Article 12 results from the fact that children so rarely have the opportunity to do this. Nevertheless, there has, over the past two decades, been an ideational shift towards recognising the value of children’s views (see Bessell 2009c), although there remains, as Badham points out, ‘a gap between the high tide of the rhetoric of participation and the low tide of effective delivery of improved services’ (Badham 2004: 153). The rhetoric of participation has frequently been put into practice as ‘consulting with children’ in adult-organised, policy-related events (Beers, Invernizzi and Milne, 2006). Within research, this often results in the collection of drawings, or children’s ‘voices’, or unreferenced stories or ‘mini case studies’ about individual children – but not in the systematic analysis of children’s perspectives, experiences or priorities (Beazley et al. 2006). Rights-based research with children insists that children should be able to express their opinions and contribute their knowledge and experiences alongside those of adults.

Freedom of expression (Article 13 CRC) is also a fundamental human right, the innovation in the CRC being that children are entitled to express their views in any way they wish, using whatever medium they prefer. Article 13 is thus an essential counterpart to Article 12, obliging researchers to consider carefully how they will implement their research questions in ways that ensure children understand, feel comfortable and are able to express themselves freely. The focus on ‘listening to children’s voices’ in the past two decades, in academia, policy and programming, has often resulted in children being asked directly about topics they may not wish to discuss, or have not previously considered (or do not wish to consider), using words they may not understand, and in an environment that is unfamiliar. In such circumstances, children are ‘consulted’ but their rights are not respected. Moreover, the way in which they are consulted may render them re-traumatised, uncomfortable, fearful, threatened – or simply bored. Article 13 obliges researchers to adopt methods that are genuinely ‘children-friendly’. It follows that such methods cannot be developed, used or evaluated independently of children. As partners in research, children should share in control of the methods used, the questions that are asked of them (and of adults), the way those questions are asked, as well as in the analysis and dissemination of results (Liebel 2010).
Methodology and Methods

At the heart of the right to be properly researched is Article 3 of the CRC: the right to the highest possible professional standards, which obliges those who work with children to ensure that professional standards are established and implemented – a principle that should be extended to include research activities. Rigorous, scientific method must be applied in research with children, especially if results are to be used in programmes designed in ‘the best interests’ of children (Article 3a, CRC). This is linked to the implication of Article 13 that appropriate, children-friendly methods are required to facilitate children’s freedom of expression.

Yet, as Bessell (2009a) has pointed out, data collection techniques, while important, are ‘alone incapable of facilitating children’s positive involvement in research’ (Bessell 2009a: 17). Appropriate, children-friendly methods are only one dimension of an overall methodology that posits children as bearers of human rights. Inappropriate methods undermine attempts to use a rights-based approach. The history of research with children over more than a century is awash with methods that silenced children or led to questionable results. For many decades, research on children, particularly that carried out within the discipline of developmental psychology, was (and often remains) dominated by the observation of children, often in environments unfamiliar to them, or by testing children without explanation of what researchers were seeking. Urie Bronfenbrenner, who was a pioneer within the ‘ecological’ approach to human development – which insists on the importance of real social contexts – wryly commented that his colleagues’ laboratory work with children could best be described as ‘the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 19). Such methods necessarily render children passive within the research process, and provide little scope for children to share and reflect on their own perspectives.

Children’s Agency and Child Protection in Research

Article 36 entitles children to protection from all forms of exploitation, which should be interpreted as including exploitation through research. The spirit of Articles 3.3 and 36 obliges researchers to avoid ‘extractive research’, which has occurred most commonly in the past in countries of the global South, with researchers (usually from the global North) mining for data without considering how results can be communicated back to participants and their communities, let alone used for their benefit. Yet, historically, research with children has focused on the results, describing methodology and method only as means to an end. Articles 3.3 and 36 together oblige researchers to expand their focus, so that the emphasis on results is complemented by an equal emphasis on the manner in which research is conducted.

On its own (as well as in combination with other ‘protection’ articles in the CRC), Article 36 points to the necessity for revising the way key ethical principles
– ‘do no harm’, voluntary participation and confidentiality – have been, and are, largely ignored in research with children, because their agency in research has so often been handed over to parents, guardians and teachers, while children remain trapped as objects in the frameworks of bio- and psycho-ethics. Handing over agency to children, especially in societies where their agency is strongly limited by custom, is one of the challenges rights-based research has to meet. Cultural rules of seniority affect access to children worldwide. The idea of seeking informed consent from children – a fundamental concept within rights-based research – does not always sit easily with local practices embedded in age-based hierarchies whereby children (and many adults) are rarely asked for their individual perspectives (Abebe 2009). Negotiating seniority rules not only requires an understanding and appreciation of local norms, but may also consume considerable time. In addition, intergenerational hierarchies are complicated by gender and marital and reproductive status, as well as by politico-economic statuses such as class (Abebe 2009, Twum-Danso 2009, Jabeen 2009).

Research ethics are thus a common preoccupation for those who research with children and young people. By this we do not mean the commonplace concerns of university ethics committees but the ethical dilemmas of working with children, particularly those who are in some way vulnerable. We shall return to this topic in the final section of this chapter.

### Constructing Children within Research

Rights-based methodology demands that researchers consciously confront the assumptions held about children. As Alderson and Morrow (2004: 22) have argued, we ‘cannot avoid holding beliefs or theories about what children are and ought to be like’. These beliefs shape, and potentially undermine, the nature of our research with children (Bessell 2009a). Rights-based research requires us to examine the ways in which children and their worlds are represented, both in research and in both global and local cultures. We are not suggesting that researchers should engage in endless debate about the ways in which childhood is constructed in different societies, across time, culture and class. Rather than becoming preoccupied with myths of ‘the discovery of childhood’, we are sympathetic to the ‘straightforward assertion that children live real childhoods rather than social constructs’ (Ennew and Morrow 2002: 15). Yet, the representation of children’s lives is often both adult-constructed and problematic, effectively reducing children’s social agency by manipulating ‘victim’ categories. As Lucchini (1996) and Punch (2001) have both argued, children construct meanings that they use actively to negotiate and resist such adult imperialisms.

Three ‘constructs’ have shaped research with children in the global South, and each deserves scrutiny from a rights perspective: age, gender and ‘problem’ groups.
**Ageless Children**

Age-based categories underpinning childhood are problematic for research. The essentialist category ‘the child’ – ungendered and age-free (other than being less than 18 years old) – is often easier to conceptualise and research than more carefully differentiated age groups; for example, boys and/or girls of primary school age; young men and women aged between 15 and 17 years; infants and pre-school children. The issue of age is both important and neglected, and needs more work within a rights perspective. Childhoods are not divided universally into the same age categories, nor are such categories homogeneous, not only because of the evolving capacities and physical growth of human children, but also because the evolving capacities are largely culturally determined (Lansdown 2005). One factor is universal, however: childhood is the most heterogeneous stage in the human life cycle, comprising the fastest rates of change and development.

Within childhood, age differences possibly outweigh gender, ethnicity, religion and other discriminatory factors. An indication of the crucial, but often taken-for-granted, influence of age is that most ‘participatory’ research with children and young people tends to focus on older children, and even young adults. This does not have to be the case, but reflects the fact that working with (rather than on or about) the youngest children requires special skills and sensitivities, which do not have to be considered with children between 10 and 17 years (Dobbs 2002, Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen 2005, Kjørholt 2005, Dockett and Perry 2007).

**Genderless Children and The ‘Girl Child’**

Gender analysis is rarely a feature of research with children, and the way in which gender shapes children’s lives tends to be given scant consideration. Severe gender-based discrimination against girls in some countries has resulted in a handful of studies on some aspect of girls lives (for example Croll 2000). Such studies have been of enormous importance in highlighting the human-rights abuses suffered by girls in some parts of the world. Yet the often-used essentialist category of the ‘Girl Child’ suggests a necessary relationship between girlhood, discrimination and exploitation (Ennew 1994). Without dismissing the harm caused, particularly to girls, as a result of sex-based discrimination, we suggest that the category of ‘Girl Child’ is highly problematic as well as philosophically indefensible. In its many incarnations it has mutated into an empty mantra that serves only to homogenise girls’ lives and the problems and opportunities they face, as well as largely ignoring the strategies they employ for coping, resisting or simply living. As Chakraborty has demonstrated in her study of young Muslim women in the bustees (slums) of Kolkata, girlhoods are not uniformly experienced as submissive, but may be both negotiated and subversive. With respect to the ‘good Muslim girl’ image, Chakraborty argues that:
Rather than perform the ‘good girl’ all of the time, the reality is that young women perform multiple identities at different times and in different spaces as they consciously navigate through private and public domains. (Chakraborty 2009: 422)

In addition, ‘girls’ are all too often elided with ‘women’, and researched with respect to their socialisation into gender roles – as ‘not-yet women’ or ‘becoming women’. This repeats the tendency identified by Durkheim a century ago (Durkheim 1956), and so ably reprised and used by Jens Qvortrup (1991): unless there is a sociology that has childhood as its object, children are forever analysed as ‘human becomings’ rather than human beings (see also Holloway and Valentine 2000).

If research with girls has often neglected the complexities of gender roles and relations, the way in which gender shapes boyhoods is even more neglected. As is the case with gender studies of adults, research with children – to the extent that gender is considered at all – tends to assume that only girls have gender. From a rights perspective, girlhoods and boyhoods are valid objects of research in their own right, not simply the locus of accounts of becoming adult females or males. Girls already are female-gendered human beings and boys already are male-gendered human beings, yet we generally know too little about the experiences of either girlhoods or boyhoods.

Children as Problem Groups

In the global South in particular, child research almost always focuses on ‘problem groups’ such as AIDS orphans, street children, child labourers, child commercial sex workers and child soldiers. Research with children on these issues is unarguably important, particularly in informing policy – indeed each of us has been involved in research with children who can be labelled with one or more of these descriptors. Yet our argument here is twofold. In the first place, children who can be described as AIDS orphans or child labourers or child prostitutes are not only members of one of these categories. These labels are not the sum total of their lives, and research with children should understand, respect and reveal the multiple dimensions of their realities, rather than reducing them to a category of ‘at risk’, ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘vulnerable’ children.

Secondly, there is a striking lack of research with children in the global South who do not fit into ‘problem groups’. As a result, childhood in the global South is often presented as characterised by exploitation or abuse, because there is a dearth of accounts of local ‘normal’ childhoods with which to compare these pathological examples (a sociological error identified long ago by Durkheim). The result is a tendency to make causal inferences based on an alien (usually Northern) construction of normal childhood. This has serious consequences for policy-making. For example, international policy focuses on ending ‘child labour’ by placing working children in school classrooms, which, like ‘the family’, are considered to be an appropriate location for childhood. While research on child
labour and children’s work has increased dramatically over the past two decades, there is less research on the everyday experiences of children in formal schooling in the global South. The relatively few studies that have taken place indicate that school is often a hostile place for children, and not only for poor children in the poorest communities (see Bessell 2009b, Beazley et al. 2006). Yet international policy is remarkable uncritical of the nature of education on offer in much of the global South.

Rights-based Opportunities and Challenges for Researchers

Understanding children as subjects of human rights, worthy of respect and dignity, who lead complex and multi-faceted lives is essential to rights-based research. Nevertheless, our experiences as researchers have made us aware that there are challenges as well as opportunities in taking this approach.

Participation in Research is a Challenge for Adults and an Opportunity for Children

Participatory research by project workers with adults in communities has a comparatively long history, which has produced a battery of research techniques that are often now used with children (Boyden and Ennew 1997). While participatory techniques were not used comprehensively to target children until the mid-1990s (Johnson, Hill and Ivan-Smith 1995), they have grown in popularity over the past decade. As Twum-Danso (2009) has pointed out, participatory research with children in ‘developing countries’ has become attractive to donors, and is often a requirement of research funding. Yet there is little consensus about what participatory research with children means in practice (Beers, Invernizzi and Milne 2006). Such research is now often attempted, but it is not always (perhaps not often) done well (Twum-Danso 2009). Moreover, research carried out under the banner of ‘participation’ is not always genuinely participatory.

One key factor is that the development of agreed criteria for what counts as fulfilment of children’s right to ‘participate’ is as yet an unmet challenge. Yet, we dispute the idea, so frequently voiced, that ‘participation is not traditional in our culture’ – it is not traditional in any culture (including for many adults). Participation can cause equal problems and challenges in countries of the global North as well as of the global South. Like participation by adults, research participation of children is a process that has to be developed, promoted and, above all, practised over time. Participation in research:

… is a process in which ‘ownership of the problem’ is increasingly shared between researchers and researched. In the first instance, researchers are likely to own the research problem and design the research, using methods that enable stakeholders to express themselves. Working directly with stakeholders
(including children), and gradually handing over responsibility to them for setting the research agenda, will change the role of researchers to ‘facilitators’, and turn the research process into a joint project. (Ennew and Plateau 2004: 15)

Moreover, children’s participation challenges adults’ preconceptions about children. Established researchers and university lecturers may find this difficult to accept. In past decades we have jointly and severally used the rights-based approach in many countries and on a wide range of topics – both in our own research and as capacity-building research advisors, working in close cooperation with local researchers. In the latter process we have found, on more than one occasion, senior participants, who feel their authority threatened and their prior research discounted, mounting initial resistance to trying out a participatory, multiple-method approach that also involves democratic relations of mutual respect and co-operation within the research team, whatever the age and status of members. However, our experience has been that, after experiencing fieldwork with children, the resisters turn into strong advocates for the rights-based approach.

Those whose activist work with children goes under the umbrella of ‘participation’ may be equally challenged. During one research capacity-building programme in which we were involved, girls who were former sex workers were among the ‘trainees’. They had become involved in the research through their membership of a local non-governmental organisation, the staff of which were also taking part in the workshop. During group work to design a research protocol we noticed that adults in each group had delegated the girls to the task of entering the adults’ ideas on a laptop. It took considerable discussion – and not a little practice – before the girls were reinstated as full group members, exchanging ideas, designing research tools and taking decisions.

The Opportunity to Collect Scientific, Children-focused Data

Choice of methods is important in ensuring the scientific rigour of research, with multiple methods allowing for triangulation of results. In this respect we would emphasise that a vital component of the approach is the refusal to accept the indefensible division between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research and data collection (Ennew and Plateau 2004). Rights-based research involves systematic research protocols that allow data, such as drawings and photographs (which are often thought of as ‘merely qualitative’) to be subjected to both statistical and ethnographic analysis, resulting in rich and verifiable information (RWG-CL 2003, Ennew and Plateau 2004, Ennew and Abebe 2010).

Policy makers and planners need hard numbers in order to design, implement and monitor policies and interventions. The bias toward quantitative data in government and organisations remains so powerful, in spite of the ‘thinness’ even of children-relative information – let alone children-centred statistics (Saporiti 1994) – that policy-makers can be unjustly dismissive of the value of richer, more close-textured, qualitative results. Unless the research methods allow for (indeed
encourage) open-ended responses, there is no hope that children will have the opportunity to tell us what they themselves find significant. All too often, research with children relies merely on anecdotes about, or stories told by, individual children (so-called ‘voices’) that cannot be generalised across the population and are usually not collected using rigorous recording processes. The potential value and impact of qualitative results, with their richer insights into children’s own perspectives, are thus lost.

Nevertheless, if numbers are essential to sound research, so too is discursive analysis, without which numbers are meaningless or misleading. Too often, researchers, seduced by the idea of participatory research with children, will collect dozens of drawings or photographs but, once back in the university or office, cannot think what to do with the images because these have not been collected systematically (Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller 2005). Adults may easily misinterpret children’s drawings if they neglect to record what the children themselves had to say about them. The result is reports based on the staple methods of questionnaire, interview and focus group discussions, illustrated with children’s drawings and boxed examples of their ‘voices’. The opportunity to gain deeper insights into children’s priorities, perspectives and experiences is lost. Children’s words and pictures are worthy of more than just being used as illustrations; their right to give their opinions should not be reduced to anecdotes, presented as ‘authentic voices’. We therefore argue for the need to acknowledge the inseparability of quantitative and qualitative methods, and to promote their integrated use in forms that are both children-friendly and rigorous.

The literature on research with children, like our own experience, indicates the importance of using a variety of methods. Developing and using methods that address the research questions, take account of children’s age or life experience, and respond to the specific context in which children live can be challenging and time-consuming. There is, however, a growing literature documenting methods that have been used successfully. An early example of cultural sensitivity in choosing methods for research with children was the shift made by Johnson, Hill and Ivan-Smith (1995) in their research in rural Nepal. They found that children there were not accustomed to drama and role play, but were happy to express their ideas by composing songs, according to village custom. Chakraborty (2009) describes using a method based on yoga, which was particularly appropriate for her research with teenage girls in Kolkata, India. Novel and adapted methods may be necessary, not only across cultures but also according to individual children’s ages, abilities and preferences (Morrow and Richards 1996). Using multiple methods can be an important means of ensuring that children are able to exert control over the techniques with which they feel most comfortable (see Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller 2005).

Research methods can be designed for more than one purpose and may need to be adapted for different social contexts. For example, in our research on children’s views and experiences of physical and emotional punishment (see Beazley et al. 2005, 2006), we were concerned to ensure that we left children feeling positive
about themselves, their lives and their participation in the research, despite the sensitive nature of the research topic. To achieve this, we drew on earlier work undertaken in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Čehajić et al. 2003) to develop a ‘protection tool’. The original version of this method, based on the Bosnian tool, used a picture of a shield, divided into five sections, labelled:

1. The person I love most …
2. If I was President/King/Prime Minister/etc. …
3. I am best at …
4. My happiest memory …
5. I feel safe with …

Children were to be invited to complete each sentence, and to take the completed shield home with them, thus ending the research with their own positive messages, rather than negative images of punishments they had witnessed or received.

In putting this method into practice elsewhere, however, we found it necessary to make adaptations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the shield has strong cultural, social and historical meaning. In the eight countries of the Asia-Pacific region in which we conducted the study on punishment, however, a shield has little resonance. Indeed, in Indonesia, where the research was carried out in post-conflict areas such as Ambon, Maluku and Halmahera, traditional shields took a great variety of shapes quite unlike those of Europe, and local feedback suggested that their primary association with warfare and violence made this image inappropriate for use in the context of our research. After discussion with local partners, it was decided to change the image to an umbrella, which symbolises protection from the elements in most countries. Yet, in the Philippines, our research partners pointed out that only females carry umbrellas, so that boys might not readily identify with this image. Furthermore, children are often beaten with umbrellas. Thus, in the Philippines an umbrella is far from being a symbol of protection and was replaced with a drawing of a ‘protection jacket’, on which sentences for completion were written on the hood and pockets (Beazley et al. 2005). A different research project in Thailand used a drawing of a raised, open hand, which has strong resonances with one of the gestures often seen in statues of the Buddha, the five fingers providing convenient spaces for the children to write (Knowing Children and UNICEF Thailand 2007). Elsewhere, national flowers and a ‘flower of peace’ have also featured in protection tools in rights-based research protocols.

Whatever local form it takes, the protection tool achieves its purpose. In several countries, it has also yielded valuable data, if children give permission for copies of their drawings to be made and retained by researchers. For example in Fiji it revealed that the person most likely to punish children was also frequently the person with whom children felt safest (Save the Children Fiji 2006).
Ethical Opportunities and Challenges

Ethical considerations in research with children emphasise the duties of adult researchers and research managers to ‘do no harm’ at all stages of research – including dissemination of results. Moreover the lowly status of children in society, and their relative lack of information and understanding, provide additional complications for voluntary participation compared to research with adults. For the foreseeable future there will always be a role for adults in research with children, and we would refute the idea that research can actually be ‘child-led’ – even if children are involved in all aspects, including data collection and analysis (Robson et al. 2009, Liebel 2010). Children need adults to channel resources, lend legal status, negotiate permission and help with dissemination (Van Buuren 1995), as well as to protect them by maintaining ethical standards, as is adult responsibility under the provisions of the CRC.

As Morrow and Richards (1996) have suggested, the shifting sets of dilemmas and cultural considerations faced by researchers in the field sometimes make nonsense of university ethical checklists. What is needed is a deep commitment to a set of principles that can be implemented flexibly depending on circumstance, but are above compromise in terms of their fundamental integrity. Central to these principles is children’s right to be protected from exploitation (Article 36 of the CRC).

We do not deny that formal ethical processes have their place – indeed some kind of peer-governed setting and monitoring of ethical standards is vital if children’s rights to protection are to be met. Yet all too often, as Morrow and Richards (1996) have pointed out, the bio-medical model on which formal ethical processes tend to be based leads to rigid rules, based in clinical research, which either do not fit, or miss altogether, the ethical dilemmas thrown up by the real world. Two principles in particular present challenges for researchers working with children: voluntarism, expressed in the idea of ‘informed consent’, and confidentiality.

‘Informed consent’ means that research participants have been meaningfully informed about all aspects of the research: the purpose, what is expected of them, the methods, the person or organisation carrying out the research, and how the information will be used and by whom. Participants need to be assured that the information is confidential and that it will not be possible for people unconnected with the research to identify them. They should also be aware that they can refuse to take part, or stop their participation at any time, for any reason, without negative consequences. This is increasingly referred to as ‘informed dissent’ or ‘informed refusal’ (Ennew and Plateau 2004, Ennew and Abebe 2010). It is becoming common practice to treat informed consent as a legal requirement, with a document to be signed, as well as for the consent of adults – parents, teachers, caretakers, guardians – to be sought first, before children are involved.

The act of signing consent forms has several implications in different settings, particularly in the global South, where people may not be literate (Abebe 2009), or may be reluctant because giving a signature implies possible legal implications (Jabeen 2009), or afraid of repercussions, because of armed conflict for example.
(UNICEF Thailand 2008). When research participants are children, there is often a requirement from ethics committees that parents or guardians provide informed consent, either in addition to or in place of children’s informed consent. Yet, as Abebe (2009: 456) points out, ‘it may not be clear which parental figures have the right to give or withhold permission’. Moreover, rights-based research insists that informed consent of children cannot be assumed from parental consent.

In rural Southern contexts local village leaders are vital gatekeepers if access to community members of any age is to be possible. As Ahsan (2009: 393) writes:

Even before I could seek their consent, I first of all had to negotiate for access with various hierarchies of adult gatekeepers … This made the young people vulnerable to power imbalances in the research settings, since they were unable to exercise their independent choice free from the influence of their adult guardians.

The process of negotiating with village leaders can be fraught, raising ethical as well as practical dilemmas. In some cases, a possible outcome of such negotiations is that individual children end up being identified or categorised in ways that cause embarrassment, stigmatisation or resentment. In one, rather extreme (but not altogether uncommon) example, researchers were faced with a village headman lining up 10 children outside his house in full view of other villagers and presenting them as ‘the community AIDS orphans’ (personal communication, Suleman Sumra, coordinator of the research described in Ahmed et al. 1999). In such a situation, researchers are faced with a sudden, acute ethical dilemma about what to say and do. The concept of informed consent is rendered meaningless and the potential for children to be exploited becomes very real. Moreover, the capacity of the researcher to reverse the situation is limited. Even in less challenging circumstances, the process of seeking informed consent can be a challenging one. As Ahsan has argued (2009), in practice, it is often difficult to determine if consent or dissent is ‘real’.

Another specific problem is that children may be so eager to help a researcher (who has higher status or power), or unaware of the consequences of discussing private matters in a group discussion, that they disclose confidential information about other people, with negative consequences for themselves or others in their community. In such cases, researchers have a duty of protection, but may have to react quickly to a sudden ethical dilemma. As in modern moral philosophy, ethical decisions are situational. Each day in the field, each group of children, each moment may provide occasion for a troublesome decision in which the ethical priorities, as well as the methodological imperatives, may have to be ranked and weighed according to the priorities of the situation.

Finally, children may wish to have trusted adults present during research sessions. In prioritising confidentiality and privacy, researchers sometimes overlook the very real fact that they are relative strangers to children, while parents or other adults may provide them with security and reassurance during the research process.
Researchers’ well-intentioned and often understandable efforts to undertake research outside the age-based hierarchies in which children in every society live may be tinged with an almost arrogant assumption that they know better than either children or the adults with whom they share their daily lives. We are not suggesting here that adult caregivers should always be present during research with children, since this can be equally problematic. Rather, we are calling into question any idea that researchers necessarily occupy a more ethical space than all other adults. If children are to be protected from exploitation during research, the position and role of all those involved must be the subject of critical reflection.

Concluding Remarks: Duties and Transformations

The discussion of informed consent and confidentiality demonstrates that research in the ‘real world’ does not fit neatly into the categories identified on the forms required by ethics committees, but requires negotiation between duty bearers and rights holders. Human rights are fulfilled when the responsibility to fulfil them for others is assumed by the groups, individuals or organisations who bear that duty. The academic research community bears an important responsibility for promoting and – to the extent that this is possible – monitoring ethical standards in research, including research carried out by non-academic bodies. Yet the ultimate duty bearers for the human rights of children are governments, which means that government research committees should play a greater role in ensuring that ethical standards are met in research with children – indeed in promoting such standards rather than merely licensing researchers and research projects. Moreover, all research ethics committees, within academia and beyond, should be highly cognisant of the on-the-ground reality of research with people, regardless of age. The aim should not be to make researchers jump through hoops or provide carefully crafted but unrealistic responses to potential ethical dilemmas, but to develop a culture in which the human rights and human dignity of research participants of all ages are respected and valued.

Thus the concept of duty-bearers is important for using a rights-based approach and avoiding the exploitation of children through research. Rights-based research with children acknowledges their agency as subjects of rights, rather than being the outcome of academic theory. The difference may be subtle, but it is crucial. The research that we (as rights-based researchers) carry out is less concerned with proving children’s agency than with challenging the real-world notion that they are passive victims of abuse, exploitation or violence.

The conventional wisdom of doing research with children is changing rapidly, despite initial resistance from some established researchers. As Liebel (2010) has pointed out that scientific research is ‘systematic curiosity’ that should develop an equal partnership between researchers and researched – a partnership that, as we have found, is transformative for both. Abebe (2009: 460) notes that ‘fieldwork is a personal experience rather than a mere academic pursuit’, one in which it is effectively
impossible not to become empathetically involved. The approach we have outlined here brings together both systematic curiosity and the deeply personal experience that is fieldwork, in a rigorous framework that places children at the core.

If this approach transforms researchers, what are (and/or might be) the effects on children’s lives? We have experienced children’s enthusiastic participation in research. Following recent rights-based research with children on their experiences and views of education in Fiji (Bessell 2009b, Bessell Low-McKenzie and Anise 2009) one girl commented ‘This was the most amazing experience. For the first time in my life I felt like I really mattered.’ As Jabeen (2009) observes, children can be personally empowered by being given the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences, particularly when no-one has ever before asked them. Children may be excited by their experiences as research designers, participants and researchers – but they are seldom irresponsible. A large body of research with children has already established beyond any question the value and eloquence of their contributions. Furthermore, a rights-based approach helps us to recognise diverse childhoods rather than constructing a single, universal (Northern) childhood, as well as promoting respect and value for children, as they are and in their diversity. Possibly most important of all for children and their futures, rights-based research provides a scientific basis for policy and action, which genuinely recognises children’s experiences and priorities.

References


