

# Exploring the nexus between participatory methods and ethics in early childhood research

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**EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH HAS** been at the forefront of participatory approaches aimed at ensuring children's involvement in research is appropriate, safe, enjoyable and meaningful. Central to this endeavour has been closer attention to key ethical considerations, most notably around young children's informed consent. However, there is growing recognition within the research community that adopting participatory methodologies does not, in and of itself, denote ethical research practice. In this article, we explore the critically important nexus between ethics and method in the context of early childhood research. We then draw upon our experience in leading a major international initiative, the Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) project, to underline the efficacy of approaches that build on the 'Three Rs' of reflexivity, rights and relationships in furthering a culture of ethics within the burgeoning field of early childhood research.

## Introduction

Increased attention on children's participation rights, largely as a consequence of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989) and developments within the interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies, has helped to legitimise the inclusion of children in research about their lives (Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2009). Viewing children as both competent and entitled to participate has challenged researchers to consider the most appropriate ways to facilitate and support their inclusion. Such an imperative is heightened in research involving young children (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005), including those who are not yet verbal (Elwick, Bradley & Sumsion, 2014; Salamon, 2015). Consequently, early childhood (EC) researchers have led the way in developing creative and innovative child-centred approaches, such as involving children in art or play activities, or in capturing their own visual data using cameras, video-recorders or baby head cameras (see, for example, Darbyshire, Schiller & MacDougall, 2005; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Robson, 2011; Sumsion, Bradley, Stratigos & Elwick, 2014). Particularly acclaimed is the multi-method Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001) to elicit the perspectives of very young children about their day care experiences.

In the EC context, such emphasis on method reflects the close consideration and creativity required to 'listen' to the perspectives of young children (Elwick et al., 2014). However, concerns have been raised that participatory methods in child research may be 'seen as a "fool-proof" technology that—when applied carefully and conscientiously—will enable research involving children to achieve ethical and epistemological validity' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 513). Similarly, while research methods adapted for eliciting the 'perspectives' of non-verbal infants through observation and interpretation are emerging, these are considered highly contentious by some researchers, who argue that the inherent uncertainties in studying infants point to the need for such research to be viewed as 'sites of ethical rather than epistemological practice' (Elwick et al., 2014, p. 198). Indeed, participatory methods cannot, in and of themselves, ensure a project is intrinsically ethical, nor safeguard ethical practice throughout the duration of a research study (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2009; Sumsion et al., 2014; Waller & Bitou, 2011). Overarching ethical issues relating to notions of childhood may be sidelined as a consequence of subsuming ethics within practical issues of method (Alderson, 2012; Davis, 1998; Palaiologou, 2014).

Increasingly, researchers, including those working in early childhood contexts, have been sharing the ethical values and 'methodological attitude' (Salamon, 2015) guiding their work, along with the ethical dilemmas they encounter when using participatory methods (see, for example, Bone, 2005; Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2012a; Ebrahim, 2010; Flewitt, 2005; Schiller & Einarsdóttir, 2009; Sumsion et al., 2014). Concomitantly, there has been increased critical engagement around key ethical issues such as whether and how to gather young children's informed consent (see, Bone, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012a; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Salamon, 2015). As Bone (2005) notes, these developments 'are steps on a journey towards a "culture of ethics" in early childhood research' (p. 3). In line with this, it is important to keep monitoring our progress on this 'journey' and to continue to collaborate in fostering a vigorous 'culture of ethics' within EC research.

In pursuit of such an aim, we begin this article by exploring the nexus between participatory methods and ethics in the context of EC research. We then draw upon our experience in leading a major international initiative, the *Ethical Research Involving Children* (ERIC) project, to examine the efficacy of a framework based on the 'Three Rs' of reflexivity, rights and relationship for continuing to further a culture of ethics in the EC research field.

## Exploring ethical issues in EC research involving children

Most ethical dilemmas in research involving children fall within or across four key domains: harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and payment and compensation (Powell, Graham, Taylor, Newell & Fitzgerald, 2011). Here we use these four domains as an organising framework to explore the nexus between method and ethics.

### Harms and benefits

Researchers' obligations to balance the protection of children with the perceived benefits of the study (NHMRC, Australian Research Council & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2003) is shaped and formed by the ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Powell et al., 2011). However, assessing potential harms and benefits is unique to each research context and hence often not straightforward (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). Different stakeholders hold divergent views about what constitutes harm and benefit, as well as acceptable levels of risk (Solberg, 2014; Spriggs, 2007). This can lead to the exclusion of young children from research on the basis of age, vulnerability and presumed incompetency.

The strong emphasis on participatory methods in EC research suggests that the discourse in the field has moved far beyond issues of exclusion and inclusion. Nevertheless, issues of competency and vulnerability continue to be key

areas of contention in the negotiations researchers have with various stakeholders (Bone, 2005; Ebrahim, 2010). As such, an important element at the nexus between ethics and participatory methods is how the justification of children's inclusion in research is understood and negotiated (Palaiologou, 2014; Skovdal & Abebe, 2012; Waller & Bitou, 2011). While participatory methods are often central to this justification, care must be taken to ensure they do not become uncritically adopted as a matter of routine.

Power dynamics are also complex in the context of research with young children (see, David, Tonkin, Powell & Anderson, 2005; Hedges, 2002; Kina, 2012; Matthews, 2001). While 'child-centred' participatory approaches aim to reduce inherent adult-child power imbalances, such dynamics can still cause harm if children's 'voices' or 'perspectives' are rendered inauthentic or meaningless as a result of implicit relational tensions, the influence of unacknowledged personal assumptions (Spyrou, 2011; Thomson, 2007), or inherent uncertainties in interpreting observational data (Elwick et al., 2014). In pursuing such nuanced understandings of harm, many researchers are now drawing attention to the ongoing ethical issues which arise as the research process unfolds, variously referred to as 'situated' or 'in-situ' ethics, or 'micro-ethical moments' (Ebrahim, 2010; Gildersleeve, 2010; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Simons & Usher, 2000).

In many respects, such discussion is emblematic of a lively culture of ethics. However, attention to the 'micro' moments needs also to be situated within broader 'macro' considerations concerning the very notion of 'childhood' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson & Fitzgerald, 2013; Lahman, 2008; Palaiologou, 2014). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest, to deepen our understanding of harm in research involving children, there is a need to engage beyond our current intellectual and social consciousness. Essentially, they argue for the need to be open to what is not yet known, including critically exploring the hidden assumptions or barriers that might limit the expansion of our collective thinking.

While harm in research tends to focus on the more immediate 'here and now', the converse is often evident when considering notions of benefit, with the latter often being more future-oriented for children as a social group rather than for participating, individual children. This may be especially so in early childhood, given that this is a time of rapid growth and change. Nevertheless, the recognition associated with 'having a say' has been found to benefit children's subjective sense of wellbeing (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Creative participatory methods may contribute to this directly through providing enhanced opportunities for enjoyment, education and a sense of empowerment (Pinter & Zandian, 2015). Even for non-verbal infants, collaborative, interpretative processes such as the likes of the Mosaic approach, may allow some benefits of the research to flow directly to the participating

children through the shared learning journey that their educators and/or parents experience. In this sense, the development of participatory methods can contribute to addressing an implicit ethical tension by potentially providing benefits to those children directly involved, as well as to others more broadly in the future.

Where does this place us, then, in considering the nexus between method and ethics? Clearly, participatory methods cannot eliminate harms and ensure ethical practice *per se*. However, the creative, innovative approaches that are now widely considered *de rigueur* in early childhood seem to go some way towards overcoming inherent ethical tensions around harm and benefits.

### **Informed consent**

There are no formal legal requirements around consent for children's participation in research in most countries, except an imperative to seek consent from parents and guardians on children's behalf (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Powell et al., 2011). However, EC research has played a significant role in challenging conceptualisations of children's consent (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012a; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012b; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005), including promoting notions of 'informed assent' to avoid legal confusion (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012a, 2012b). While some researchers remain wary of promoting assent rather than consent because it can be associated with the absence of refusal or objection (Alderson & Morrow, 2011), such debates serve to highlight the nuanced nature of such ethical considerations amongst EC researchers.

The development of creative, child-friendly information packs or pictorial consent forms (see, for example, Bone, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012b) also demonstrate the applied engagement EC researchers bring to progressing ethical practice around consent. Such instruments alone cannot, of course, guarantee ethical soundness since the process must be contextualised within the broader milieu of children's lives. For instance, seeking informed consent in early childhood settings creates a wide range of possible social and peer pressures and tensions (Dockett et al., 2012a). In addition, the novelty of child-friendly consent forms may overshadow children's attention towards making an informed choice. Hence, those advocating innovative approaches to informed consent (Dockett et al., 2012a, 2012b) also caution against complacency in their use.

Alongside initial informed consent, many EC researchers highlight that consent must be renegotiable, allowing children to cease their participation without negative repercussions (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Flewitt, 2005). Consent is thus becoming understood as an ongoing process, sometimes referred to as 'process consent' (Dockett et al., 2012a). In EC research, particularly with infants, this requires close attention to children's expressions, signals

and body language to gauge indications of assent and/or dissent (Dockett et al., 2012a; Salamon, 2015). In some respects it may be easier for children to assert agency over consent in EC research, as young children are less heavily 'schooled' in adult-child power relations and more used to moving spontaneously between activities (Lowe, 2012; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). In addition, the likes of the Mosaic approach offer scope for children to opt in and out of different parts of the research, potentially honouring process consent and making provision for children who initially dissented to change their mind later on (Dockett et al., 2012a). Despite the rhetoric, children's withdrawal, however temporary, can be a source of tension for researchers (Warin, 2011), yet Dockett et al. (2012a) suggest that this is a tension researchers have to learn to live with, asserting that children's dissent should not need to be justified.

EC research has made substantial contributions toward furthering ethical practice around consent in research involving children. Further, debates around notions of dissent gesture to a more critical engagement around connections between ethics and method that can otherwise remain muted. Ongoing reflexive engagement is required to help ensure creative consent practices retain ethical validity and continue to be contextualised within the broader milieu of the relationships involved in research.

### **Privacy and confidentiality**

Participatory methods increase the involvement of researchers in children's lives and can blur the boundaries of what children want to reveal or share (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). During the multiple collaborative sessions common in participatory research, the researcher often shifts from an unknown adult to someone children trust and, consequently, children are often more forthcoming in what they offer the research. Where audio-visual methods are used, privacy issues can be exacerbated and parameters extended. Alongside greater scope to document aspects of their lives they wish to share, children are handed more responsibility in relation to the privacy and consent of others (Robson, 2011; Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). For example, they may capture data beyond the research topic that could potentially breach another's privacy (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). Children may also inadvertently capture aspects of their lives that they do not wish to share, such as dangers or cleanliness in their homes, evident in the background of intended subject matter. These issues again highlight the complex nexus between method and ethics, and require further attention in EC contexts where children may have less experience of the technology and limited understanding of associated notions such as fields of view.

A further issue stems from the observational components common to participatory activities in EC research. Young children's privacy may not be given the same due as that of older children or adults, as a consequence of their

reliance upon adults and being subject to more prevalent supervision. Parents or educators may feel they have a right to see data, whether this is to screen it, to satisfy curiosity or to offer context and insight. Further, a number of researchers have questioned the observation of children in all aspects of their play (Palaiologou, 2014; Waller & Bitou, 2011). There are reports of young children indicating that they do not want to be observed, such as shouting 'no' or stopping their play if they see the researcher writing in their notebook (Dockett et al., 2012a; Palaiologou, 2014). Indeed, some research suggests that adult presence is a key cue to children that an activity is no longer play (Lowe, 2012; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). Therefore, queries have arisen regarding whether it is in children's best interest for everything about their lives to be uncovered, such as their secret play spaces, and whether their rights to privacy may be more important than the potential developments for teaching practice emerging from research (Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Privacy of participants in the publication of any material incorporating participatory audio-visual outputs also raises tensions. Visual evidence is generally pixelated to provide anonymity, but Nutbrown (2011) has questioned this practice, suggesting this 'may represent a further "crisis of representation" and is an example of the "Othering" of young children in research' (p. 3). Indeed, although research guidelines commonly advocate for anonymity, children sometimes want to have their work or input identified. Some researchers have found that repeatedly trying to explain anonymity to young children fostered a belief that children who participated in the research were in danger (Dockett et al., 2012a). With proliferation in the use of participatory methods, these are important ethical considerations, highlighting the complex interplay between micro-ethical moments and broader 'macro' ethical contexts.

### **Payment and compensation**

There is considerable debate about payment and compensation in social research involving children. Existing literature draws attention to four types of payment that exist in research situations: reimbursement, compensation, appreciation and incentive (Wendler, Rackoff, Emanuel & Grady, 2002). Reimbursement refers to direct costs that families encounter through participating in the research such as transportation, meals, accommodation or child care. Compensation payments provide recompense to children or parents for time, work and effort, and for any inconvenience that participation causes, such as for children who may contribute financially to their household. Appreciation may be shown by age/culturally appropriate gifts given to children at the end of the research. These three types of payment align with the ethical principle of justice and are not seen to be overly contentious. However, incentive payments are the subject of much greater debate when they may act to bribe, coerce or pressure children or parents to consent to participation, because such incentives compromise the ethical principle of respect.

Clearly context is an essential consideration in relation to payment and compensation; however, very little research has considered this debate in EC research contexts. This lack of attention may be in some way related to the popularity of participatory methods. The likes of creative art and mapping activities may not differ significantly from many young children's experiences of collaborative EC education. Therefore, customary expectations of these settings may leave researchers with little dilemma in relation to issues of compensation beyond the need to convey appreciation. Nevertheless, further attention may be warranted in EC research contexts, particularly those situated beyond educational settings.

### **Summarising the journey towards a 'culture of ethics'**

Having explored the four key areas of ethical consideration, it is evident the field of EC research continues to prompt critical thinking especially in relation to the way participatory methods are applied and evaluated. In other words, the kind of methodological innovation that has been a hallmark of EC research has opened the way for deeper engagement with underlying ethical issues. While such engagement has been weighted towards issues of consent, there are clearly other ethical considerations (for example, around harm, benefits, privacy and payment) that participatory methods cannot, in and of themselves, safeguard. What is also required, then, is a disposition towards 'in situ' ethics and heightened consciousness of broader 'macro' considerations tied to ethical research, most notably the very conceptualisation of childhood and the status and rights we afford children. With this in mind, we now draw upon insights from the ERIC project to consider the efficacy of a framework built on 'Three Rs' for continuing to progress a culture of ethics in EC research.

### **The Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) Project**

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The discussion thus far highlights researchers' increasingly shared engagement with, and reflection on, research as a 'site of ethical practice' (Elwick et al., 2014) and the ethical dilemmas that arise 'in situ', long after formal ethical compliance requirements have been met (see, for example, Ebrahim, 2010; Schiller & Einarsdóttir, 2009). Such reflections give rise to the lament that 'there is often little conceptual work available to draw on ... We need both a language to articulate and understand these ethical issues and an approach that assists us to deal with these issues when they arise' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 265).

The ERIC project emerged in response to the identified need for more support and guidance in negotiating these kinds of ethical issues and dilemmas, something further affirmed in the findings of an international survey of 257 researchers from 46 countries (Powell et al., 2011).

A partnership was formed between the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, the UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti, the Childwatch International Research Network, and the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago, to address these concerns. A two-year consultation process took place, during which almost 400 researchers and other stakeholders contributed their expertise, alongside a comprehensive review of existing evidence about ethical issues, concerns and best practice in research involving children. This consultation and review process culminated in the development of a range of open access resources, available in a print-based compendium and online via a dedicated website ([www.childethics.com](http://www.childethics.com)) to help mobilise the international research community toward more ethical approaches to research involving children.

The ERIC resources currently consist of six components: an *International Charter*; evidence-based *Guidance*; a collection of *Case Studies*; a 'Getting Started' framework of questions to help facilitate a more reflexive approach; *Resources* including an online library; and a monitored online *Forum* for discussion and debate. It is not our intention to detail these resources here but rather to briefly explain the underlying conceptual framing of the ERIC initiative, which is based around 'Three Rs' as outlined below, since these not only resonate with the issues and tensions identified previously in this paper but may also offer significant potential in furthering a culture of ethics in EC research.

### The Three Rs

Contemporary discussions of the ethical dimensions of research reflect higher aspirations than mere compliance with institutional ethical reviews (Masson, 2004). Exemplifying this, Bone (2005), reflecting on her ethical journey in a qualitative study with young children, identified issues that coalesced around notions of children's rights, relationship building with stakeholders and the importance of researcher reflexivity. These themes are now woven through the narratives of an increasing number of researchers as they share their experiences (see, Ebrahim, 2010; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Sumsion et al., 2014). Drawing upon similar ideas, Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia and DeRoche (2011) proposed a Culturally Responsive Relational Reflexive Ethics (CRRRE) approach, within which they coined the phrase 'Three Rs', 'to drolly evoke a sense of ... belief that these elements [responsiveness, the relational and reflexivity] should be fundamental to research' (p. 1404).

Reflecting on our own work with the ERIC initiative, a similar framework of 'Three Rs'—reflexivity, rights and relationships—provides the scaffold on which the remainder of the resources are built. Together these promote and enable an inquiry approach to ethical problem solving that privileges dialogue around the tensions that have come to characterise research involving children.

### Reflexivity

Reflexivity is increasingly advocated as critical to ethical validity in social research (see, Ebrahim, 2010; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Kina, 2012; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Spyrou, 2011), yet it remains somewhat diffuse in meaning and uncertain in status. It centres on the capacity of researchers to critically consider, make transparent and assume responsibility for the potential impact of the research process on all involved, including participants, communities and researchers themselves, as well as on the body of knowledge under investigation. Reflexivity differs from reflection in that it moves beyond the descriptive 'what' and the analytical 'why' and 'what if' of ethical dilemmas to the critical 'now what'. Thus, reflexivity offers a means by which participatory methods can be analysed to reveal the ethical nuance inherent in the creative processes used to invite and engage children in the research.

Of particular importance to EC research is the assertion by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) that reflexivity requires the collective examination of the social and intellectual unconscious. As a starting point, the ERIC initiative recognised it is vital to identify deeply held assumptions about children and childhood, 'those take-for-granted ideas, commonsense beliefs, and self-evident rules of thumb' (Brookfield, 1990, p. 177) that underlie our thoughts and actions throughout the research process. Analysing the validity of these assumptions in relation to different research contexts and using this newly formed knowledge to appropriately inform our actions and practices in the particular 'ethical moment' is an important step in reflexive thinking (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity thus affords the kind of disposition required to think critically about childhood and about the role and place of children in society (David et al., 2005). As Lahman (2008) suggests, 'it may well be that the moment we feel our research has captured an understanding of childhood we are on the shakiest ground' (p. 283). In other words, reflexivity provokes us to remain open to that which is not yet known.

It is this kind of reflexivity the ERIC initiative argues is central to developing 'ethical mindfulness': a 'constant alertness to, and engagement with, ethical dilemmas' (Warin, 2011, p. 810). Such ethical mindfulness heightens awareness of, and sensitivity to, the ongoing nature of ethical decision making in research, which is, in turn, critical to navigating 'situated ethics' (Ebrahim, 2010). The kind of dilemmas that arise 'in situ' generally occur well after formal ethical review and compliance processes have been met but have the 'potential to harm/help individual participants, constrain/enable the research process, and perpetuate/disrupt narratives' (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 408). Hence, reflexivity enables researchers to work productively with the tensions inherent in such binaries and encourages deeper recognition of opportunities to improve ethical practice. As Sumsion et al. (2014) remind us in their research with infants, being 'critically reflexive

and mindful requires us to interrogate our epistemological and ontological assumptions' (p. 170), and develop the capacity to simultaneously 'stand back' and 'experience fully' the ethical challenges. Such reflexivity is integral to the ERIC initiative, given its prime purpose is supporting and promoting a culture of ethics that recognises the inextricable links between ethical decision making and respect for the human dignity of children.

## Rights

Following the near universal ratification of the 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), it seems imperative that any conceptual framework for ethical research involving children should recognise children's entitlement to fundamental human rights, alongside those particular rights relevant to their status as children. The UNCRC is the first and most complete international instrument to assert a full range of rights for children and, in effect, is a 'legal articulation of a broader philosophical perspective' (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012, p. 77). Early childhood is recognised as a critical period for the realisation of rights in a special General Comment from the UNCRC (No. 7, 2005). This states that 'children, including the very youngest children, [should] be respected as persons in their own right' (UNCRC, 2005, p. 3).

While the UNCRC does not specifically refer to research, a number of rights relevant to children's involvement need to be transparent in any ethical framework intended to promote and improve ethical decision making. These include: children's rights to information, freedom of thought and conscience, and forming their own view; respect for parents and carers in providing direction to children consistent with their evolving capacities and best interests; protection of children's health, survival, standard of living, development, reputation and privacy; and prevention of discrimination, abuse and exploitation (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Giving visibility and legitimacy to the agency and participation of children, particularly as expressed in Articles 12 and 13, the UNCRC draws attention to the need to balance children's rights to provision, protection and participation. While few would disagree with young children's rights to provision and protection, assessing the capacity and capability of young children to participate has been considerably more contentious. The tension between protective and participatory standpoints remains a key locus of ethical challenges and dilemmas.

While the UNCRC can and should usefully inform ethical research practice (Aitken & Herman, 2009), some researchers have advocated for its translation into more workable ethics for research purposes (Bell, 2008). The ERIC initiative has sought to do this and builds in explicit reference to relevant UNCRC articles and the guidance they offer when applied to research involving children. Further, featuring children's rights as one of the foundational 'Three R' pillars of ethical research provides

a way of bridging the tensions between participatory and protectionist discourses. Rather than being seen in oppositional terms, the reflexive approach described above allows for children's protection and participation to be viewed such that the competence, dependence and vulnerability of children do not, in themselves, determine children's inclusion or exclusion from research so much as inform the way in which their participation takes place. In general, the focus on participatory methods in EC research, especially those in which children are involved in collecting *and* interpreting the data, honours children's rights to participation. However, adoption of creative participatory methods alone does not ensure that children have genuine opportunities to enact their own *agency* in the research process (Waller & Bitou, 2011). With this in mind, close attention to rights helps to elucidate where further progress can continue to be made within existing 'best practice'.

## Relationships

As the discussion of reflexivity and rights above has alluded to, ethical issues and challenges often occur, and are negotiated, in the relational space between researchers and the multiple others involved in the research process (Salamon, 2015). In striving towards ethical research it is necessary to develop 'an interdependent awareness of how I, as a researcher, am influencing my research participants' perceptions and a simultaneous and interdependent awareness of how they are influencing me' (Warin, 2011, p. 810). Further, the research relationship between the researcher and child is supported, circumscribed and impacted by relationships with parents, carers, other adults in gate-keeping roles, commissioning bodies, funders, ethics review boards and the like.

In her work with infants, Salamon (2015) highlights that an initial focus on an ethical relationship between infant and researcher creates conditions for authentic participatory opportunities. Consequently, creative participatory methods act to close the gap between the researcher and the lives and experiences of children and their families. Relationships with children can help educators, parents or researchers provide a context for interpreting the nuances of children's behaviour and communication, in relation to processes such as consent. Yet, there is a need for careful, embodied listening to attune to children's behavioural or emotional signals, which may sometimes appear mixed due to conflicting wishes and a sense of duty (Dockett et al., 2012a). Alongside this is the need for critical reflexivity and engagement in ongoing dialogue regarding our capacity to ascertain or represent the 'voice' or 'perspective' of very young children (Elwick et al., 2014). Therefore, while close relationships developed through participatory methods are crucial, they can also somewhat enhance the number and the complexity of micro-ethical moments and essentially re-personalise morality in research (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Moss & Petrie 2002). Thus, recognition

and understanding of the importance and influence of relationships is critical to the continued ethical validity of participatory methods.

## Conclusion

Developing and documenting creative, engaging participatory methods for research involving young children has been an enduring legacy of EC scholars. Implicit in such methods is a deep regard for children and for their learning and development needs, preferences and potential. Explicit attention has been given to attendant ethical issues, most notably around informed consent. However, various scholars have also cautioned against uncritically conflating methods with ethics since participatory approaches do not always produce ethical research. Instead, nurturing a culture of ethics requires that researchers continually examine their assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs about children and childhood as one way of helping to engage more critically with key ethical considerations linked to informed consent, harm and benefits, privacy and confidentiality, payment and reimbursement, and the like.

Developing such ethical mindfulness requires an inquiry-based approach that builds on the kind of thinking previously progressed by others (Bone, 2005; Lahman et al., 2011). Following extensive research and consultation, the ERIC initiative adopted such an approach, based on a framework of Three Rs—reflexivity, rights and relationship. These Three Rs, linked in multiple ways, position ethics as an ongoing social practice. To be authentically reflexive recognises that ethical decision making is required throughout the research process, that the dignity and wellbeing of children are central to such decision making, and that various relationships shape the ways in which both of these are upheld throughout the research process.

While there is no approach or framework that ultimately guarantees research involving children—in any context—can be planned, implemented, disseminated and evaluated in an assiduously ethical way, it is nevertheless imperative that the research community continues to collaborate in guarding against ethical complacency. This includes challenging any assumptions that particular methods, irrespective of how creative, fun or ‘child-friendly’ they appear to be, necessarily represent ethical practice. For researchers, this also means being able to work productively with the dissonance, conflict, uncertainty and ambivalence that invariably accompany ethical decision making, much of which may only become apparent long after ethical review and compliance obligations have been met. The ERIC initiative has sought to provide a framework and resources to foster such ethical mindfulness. The EC research community is potentially well-placed to lead further developments in this space.

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