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Do we hear what children want to say? Ethical praxis when choosing research tools with children under five

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Over the recent years there has been a shift in the field of early childhood research to involving young children in the research process. A vast body of literature [Evans, P., & Fuller, M. (1996). Hello. Who am I speaking to? Communicating with pre-school children in educational research settings. Early Years, 17(1), 17–20; Clark, A. (2004). Listening as a way of life. London: National Children’s Bureau; Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2001). Listening to young children: The mosaic approach. London: National Children’s Bureau; Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2005). Spaces to play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic approach. London: National Children’s Bureau; Thomson, P. (Ed.). (2008). Doing visual research with children and young people. Abingdon: Routledge; Farrell, A. (Ed.). (2005). Ethical research with children. Maidenhead: Open University Press] discusses methods to be used with young children in research by means of participatory methods and listening to children’s voices. A number of researchers mentioned throughout the paper have offered creative and innovative research tools that enable young children to participate in research. While recognising the responsibility to keep the discourse around children’s participation alive, there is a need to problematise it as well as the issue of participation of young children is a complex one which requires continuous critical reflection. Thus the enquiry I conduct here employed grounded theory and aims to examine the paradigm of children’s participation in research. It is suggested in this paper that although participation is a vitally important element in researching young children, the discourse of children’s participation should be focused additionally on ethical praxis of the research which should revolve around six key layers: intersubjectivity, indivisibility, phronesis, parsimony, equilibrium and finally the power of relationships and interaction between children and adults. As a consequence of this enquiry I conclude that all methods become relevant to research with children when ethical praxis characterises the nature of the project.

Keywords: ethical praxis; participation; early childhood research; children’s voices; methods

Introduction

The field of early childhood has seen a shift on constructions of childhood through the years, with the introduction of the United Nations Declaration on Children’s Rights in 1989 opening the public debate in regard to our views (Alderson, 2000, 2004, 2008; Christensen & James, 2008; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Einarsdottir, 2007; Farrell, 2005; Gilligan, 1982; James & James, 2008; Mathews, 2003; Thomson, 2008; Wyness, 2005, 2010). Key emerging issues within the United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights were

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that children are to be seen as full individual human beings and as active members of their society which has an obligation to allow children to participate in all forms of their life.

Dominant traditional views of childhood, such as children as being incapable and dependent, not able to make decisions and understand the world and psychological approaches of stages and ages and childhood as a phase for preparing children to enter adulthood, have now been subverted (Christensen & James, 2008; Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Edminston, 2008; Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011). As a result the emerging views of childhood accept children as capable and independent, as active citizens and decision-makers who are able to contribute ideas, as having rights and especially the right to participate in all aspects of life. This has brought an ideological shift in all aspects of the study of the field of early childhood, with these changes now being mirrored in thinking how research is conducted with young children (Alderson, 2000, 2004; Clark, 2005a, 2005b; Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2004, 2005). Consequently, researchers in early childhood are now more than ever-debating issues around how we are doing research with children (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Gray & Winter, 2011; Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011; Harcourt et al., 2011; O’Keane, 2008; Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2012).

The illusion of participation

In the twenty-first century the debate is now one of how to engage in ethical research with young children with the key emerging ideological trends being around children not anymore being seen as objects in research for whom research is happening to them, but having a more active role. Now they are considered as subjects in research with the right to participate and as having ‘agency’ (Hagglund, 2012, p. xiii). The search for participatory methods when undertaking research with children has led to creative methods (see, for example, the work of Balen, Hlroyd, Mountain, & Wood, 2001; Christensen & James, 2008; Clark, 2005a, 2005b; Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2011; Evans & Fuller, 1996; Jans, 2004; Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012). It seems, however, that there is a pathological shift of dismissing research methods in favour of merely participation of young children. The term ‘participation’ of children in the field of early childhood has been deemed to be akin to a social epidemic with the spread of the idea of children as participants and social actors having agency becoming seemingly irresistible. As a consequence it can be suggested that we now suffer an epidemiology of children’s voices, which is great thinking, but there ought to be caution as a social epidemic has the potential to bring narrowed, ‘mono-layered’ approaches that do not allow for plurality, difference and diversity which are key issues in conducting research and as Kjørholt, Moss, and Clark (2005, p. 176) point out ‘[c]an give rise to an oversimplified idea of unambiguous view of the child and listening’.

Harcourt and Einarsdottir (2011, p. 303) stress the challenges of children’s voices in research and they argue that:

voices are always social, emphasising that the notion of ‘voice’ must be understood as a multidimensional social construction, which is subject to change (citing Komulainen 2007: 13). Meaning comes into existence when two or more voices come into contact: there has to be a speaker and a listener, and ‘addresser’ and ‘addresse’.

Moreover, I argue that ‘voices’ cannot be divorced from the language system and linguistic discourse as they involve levels of linguistic pragmatism that constitutes a social
institution and is the basis of common understanding in the society. Hence, ‘voice’ is the sign of a set of sounds which has meaning and in de Saussure’s (1959) view signs are ‘arbitrary’. In that sense there is no necessary relation between a sign and its referent; rather signs are defined in relation to other signs. In that sense it is proposed that ‘voices’ is language and as such is a functional system to be understood in terms of its aims: communication or as de Saussure (1959, p. 87) puts it, it concerns ‘reciprocal relations’ of the parts, rather than considering them in isolation. Thus children’s ‘voices’ in research should be examined in the reciprocal and interacting effects of the different practices (variety of methods). Nevertheless, linguistic articulation is by its nature complex. Lacan (1968), for example, in the psychoanalytical paradigm, relates structures of conscious thought (necessary for linguistic articulation) to structures of the unconscious, representing the subject not as something transparent and accessible, à la Descartes, but as something constructed in language. Consequently, linguistic articulation of subject knowledge, the core activity of research, is complex and involves a high level of difficulty. Linguistic articulation requires correspondence of language with knowledge, with reality as transparent reflection (or expression) of the reality of social structures.

The participation discourse focuses only on what methods should be chosen and what the appropriate methods are (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) and conclude that mainly hermeneutic methods are the ones that facilitate participation of children (Jans, 2004; Kjørholt, 2005). Such an approach has the potential to marginalise plurality of methods in research and leads to methodological adult-oriented individualism and a narrow linear conception of children’s ‘voices’. Rhedding-Jones, Bae, and Winger (2008, p. 54) illustrate that danger:

Giving children a voice, listening to their stories, watching their agentic actions and really seeing them has to be grounded in an awareness of the asymmetric power relations between children and adults. A focus on children’s voices is not a convenient way to legitimise postmodern knowledge.

I am arguing in this paper, therefore, that instead of examining methods as parts of participation, research should prioritise the structure of the complex union between methodology and ethical practices. This union should reflect an ethical commitment to creating conditions for engagement by the community for their own purposes. Participatory methods should instead reflect an ethical commitment to creating conditions for engagement of young children by the research community. Participatory methods as an ‘ethic of care’ should be about addressing responsibilities of delivering rigorous research. While currently a vast body of literature is engaged in the discussion of what participatory methods with young children can be (and the success of these methods) one thing that becomes clear is the need for research to be ethically committed in order that we might facilitate participation, rather than limit it.

It has been suggested that the term ‘participation’ may mask tokenism and provide an illusion of consent and consultation (Mohan, 2001), when participation is presented as a set of techniques or models (Cornwall, 2008; Hart, 1992; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Shier, 2001) rather than as a commitment to working with children and may result in reproduction, rather that original in-depth rigorous research. Ethical commitment to research with young children should move beyond not harming children (and getting their consent) to how we create responsible relationships involving children with research. Such a process is one that should be continuously negotiated between researchers and children.
It is my contention, therefore, that research has been simplified and is losing its rigour in the name of participation, with researchers finding themselves in a dilemma between choosing methods of involving children, rather than choosing methods that reflect the nature of the research. The emphasis on ‘commitment to conducting research with children, rather on children or without them or about them’ (O’Keane, 2008, p. 125) has led research with young children to focus on hermeneutic methods and narrative approaches to data collection and analysis (Dowling, 2004). It is not suggested here that these approaches are not effective, but what it is suggested is that research with young children should not be driven by the methods debate that seem to be participatory and avoid the plurality of methods in research. The current ideological position regarding the simplicity of:

[The arguments against simplifying] research methods in the name of participation of children is underpinned by the view of the child as ‘[…] as re-constructor of knowledge, values, cultures and identities evolving into a complex construction of the child as an active citizen who is ready, can achieve and, hence, is able to participate in all activities involving him/her’. (Palaiologou, 2012a, p. 2)

As a result I will argue that the fundamental questions on how we can achieve participatory research with young children should be moderated to how we can achieve ethical research with young children where children are encouraged to take responsibility and ownership, while at the same time autonomy and shared responsibility is encouraged. Moreover, I consider the debate about participatory research with young children should move beyond mere participation and into a critical engagement on ethical research as ethics should be the fundamental key notion of research with young children. Thus the views offered in this paper explore what ethical research is, especially with children under five, and how we can design research projects that actually listen to children and allow them to truly participate.

**Purpose of the study**

The enquiry undertaken in this paper thus aims to investigate how we move beyond the discussion of the methods to focus on child–adult relations in research (Mannion, 2007) and how we embed the ‘awareness of asymmetric power relations between children and adults’ in research. This analysis is seeking to understand this ‘asymmetric power’ and attempts to examine the complex union of methodology and ethical practice as a whole. Key questions of this project are:

1. How can we achieve ethical research with children especially under five?
2. How can we design research projects that ‘listen to’ children?
3. How do we limit the ‘asymmetric power of adults to children’ in research?

This paper aims to promote the notion of creating ethical spaces for children as being central to the research process. The discussion conducted is based on grounded theory as the main aim is to generate theory of ethical research with children instead of being ‘diverted from this truism (that narrative methods are the ones that effectively secure participation of children) […] to test existing theories or a theory that they have barely started to generate’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). The discourse of participation in research and the ethics with young children is still in embryonic stage, and researchers are still ‘testing’ ideas and research methods. Thus the purpose of this discussion is
to generate new ideas rather than test existing ones. I will make use of three research projects conducted with young children with which I have been involved as the basis for this discussion.

The first project took place in an early-years setting in England and aimed to examine how children construct the concept of danger. It researched 35 children from the ages of two to the ages of six. It used narrative observations and pictographic questionnaire with children. The questionnaire was designed with a focus group. A number of items were discussed with children and pictures/symbols were offered to young children to choose. The questionnaire was developed with a group of children and then it was implemented with the rest of the sample.

The second project was examining how transdisciplinarity in early childhood pedagogy can facilitate the creation of learning environments. This research project used a mixed-methods approach where parents, early-years teachers and children were surveyed and interviewed at an initial stage. Then an intervention was developed in three stages. During the intervention narrative and quantitative methods were employed.

Finally the third project was examining the digital technologies that children were using at home in four European countries and similarly to the other three projects; it uses qualitative and quantitative methods with young children under five. The reason for choosing these three projects was that the children in all projects were under the age of five and that in all three projects research methods that were used collectively included a plurality of methods with the young children: narrative and quantifying methods. The narrative methods were observations, interviews, children’s stories, drawings and digital media. The quantifying methods were surveys, questionnaires and checklists.

This discussion makes use of self-observation diaries, memos and observations to collect data during the duration of these three research projects in order to see how research methods could be developed to be truly participatory with children.

To conclude this section, in the initial design of the three projects careful consideration was given to ethical implications. Each project attempted to ensure there was no harm, either emotional or physical, to children, families and other participants involved and there was no imbalance that would have a negative effect on their lives. All participants were continuously informed with consent being sought at all stages of the research project and reference was made to standard ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004; British Psychological Association, 2009; Clark, 2004; National Children’s Bureau, 2002, 2003). All three projects also used Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation as well as Shier’s (2001) Pathways to Participation in order to take account of the subject matter in the investigation and the level of participation of all involved.

Results and analysis: a case for ethical praxis

Examining the data of how these three projects had used research methods, it emerged that ethics should not be just a part of a research project, but should be embodied as a synchronised embedded element of the research process as a whole. A key finding was that the ethical practices employed in the three research projects were based on a set of relationships among the participants and the researchers. However, it became apparent that it was problematic in each project as the models of ethical participation that were used did not capture the essence of what is ethical research with children. For example, in the project that was examining how transdisciplinarity in early childhood pedagogy...
can facilitate the creating of effective learning environments, narrative methods were used to collect data on children’s views on their learning environments. Children used digital media techniques such as video recordings and cameras to capture their experiences. Analysis of data on how children were using these media demonstrated that it had an element of isolation of the systematic structure of the research design. Analysis of observations of when three-year-old children were using digital media, to record certain events and then describe them in the form of a story, demonstrated that at a surface level it appeared that children were participating and understood the purpose of the activities as part of the research design, but when they narrated their stories about the activities there were limited links with the original purpose of the activity.

Tuck (2007) describes participatory research as a ‘decolonizing project of recovery, knowing, analysis and struggle’ which she calls ‘theorising back’. In this sense, achieving participation of young children in research should help shape the questions and be part of the interpretations about their lives and include those children whose voices have been respected, especially the ones who hold deep knowledge of their lives and experiences. This can be understood as ethical praxis. For example, in the project on children under five and their use of digital technologies the main aim was to examine what digital media children are using and how they engaged with them. As the sample of this project was large (more than 200 children were involved over a period of two years), and was looking a number of items in regards to children’s uses of digital technologies, it was decided to use a survey with the children. The survey took the form of a pictographic questionnaire where a number of images were given to focus groups of children with the items in the survey being explored with the focus groups. The children themselves helped the researchers to develop this survey by including or excluding items and they also helped them to choose the pictures. The children were surveyed with the pictographic questionnaire in the presence of an adult and as mentioned above in the ethics section the Shier’s pathways to participation were taken into consideration when children were surveyed.

In this activity it became clear that central to research is the causality between actions and theory and the analysis of actions that generate theory. Thus the notion of praxis, as described by theorists such as Freire (1972, 1986), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Bernstein (1971, 1983), Gadotti (1996), Habermas (1973), Kemmis and Smith (2008) and Pascal and Bertram (2012), is going beyond the simplicity of how to do things, but asking why and how. Practice refers to human actions, but it was evident from observations in all three projects that practice is not necessarily connected with theory or justifications derived from theoretical approaches. The quote from an early-years teacher in regards to observations in the setting and how they informed their curriculum illustrates this point:

[Observations are] helping me to explore what children’s skills are, but an observation is a skill that comes over time … the more you do … the better. Observations are a way to listen to children so I can now, after ten years, guide them [the children] to show …the possibilities, and help them see how nicely they can play. (Quote from a teacher on the Transdisciplinarity in Early Childhood Education and Doxastic Pedagogy project)

In this extract the early-years teacher discusses the role of observation as a facilitator for ‘helping children to play nicely’, but this contradicts the nature of participation of children. In this quote observations are used by the adults as a way to understand children but children have no involvement in the process. Thus claiming that ‘observation is a
way to listen to children’ offers an illusion of participation. In this instance the method is becoming didactic as described by Gallacher and Gallagher (2008).

It was found in the observations of how methods were applied with children in these three projects that a hierarchical approach to participation and ethical practice with children under five (such as the work of Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) was problematic. Research methods as they are known and used in education typically require a level of linguistic articulation which, by its nature, is difficult and at some point impossible. As I have suggested earlier linguistic articulation is a complex process to be achieved and requires a speaker and a listener or an ‘addresser’ and an ‘addressee’ (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011), i.e. correspondent and corresponder. Linguistic articulation requires from individuals a correspondence between mind and expressive language. The type of language that is used to articulate ideas is determined by the individual’s perceptions of objects, values systems and community codes. Hierarchical models of participation require from young children the use of a level of linguistic articulation which they might not have acquired yet. Moreover, these hierarchical approaches might be different from the child’s values system and community codes. Thus hierarchical ‘universal’ approaches to ethical participation of young children can become fragmented.

Kirby’s et al. (2003) model of non-hierarchical participation, based on circumstances that are determining the type of participation or Cornwall’s (2008) representation of participation as a continuum, appears to reflect more on the quest of ethical participation. Polanyi (1998) stresses there are aspects of our knowing that resist articulation in propositional form and suggests that one cannot capture the act of integration whereby the explicitly learnt becomes tacit and is available for productive use. Language belongs to individuals’ collectivity, constitutes a system made up of sounds and as having meaning. What characterises language is a system of differences and the kind of differences that a language embodies are central to the way that objects in reality are classified and categorised for the basis of common understanding in the society. This common understanding might be lacking in the research process and this is the challenge that researchers face with children under five.

In the case of research the aim is to construct knowledge and implement what is learnt, which is a form of action. On that basis it is suggested here that the notion of praxis attached to ethics (ethical praxis) is appropriate if we are to examine ethical participation of children at all aspects of the research project: design, methods, how the data are analysed, how conclusions are reached, findings and how these findings are informing practice and actions.

If we accept to view as key element in participation the union of methodology and ethics as a synchronistic relation then ethical praxis becomes appropriate. Ethical praxis means examining the research as a whole and not as compartmentalised parts. In that sense ethical praxis in research is concerned with research with young children as a whole (methodology) over the parts (methods). Thus, we need to move the discussion for participation beyond the methods agenda that mainly is adult driven.

On this basis, ethical praxis is concerned with the exercise of logic, moral judgment and sensitivity to the contexts of children’s lives, involving the latter’s culture, religion, social values and economic and political situation. Thus the researcher should firstly develop a full understanding of the nature of the projects and methods under the lens of a set of principles orienting the ethical praxis. (Palaiologou, 2012b, p. 35)

These sets of principles can become core axes in questioning the ethical continuum in research. In praxis Aristotle distinguishes two key elements, eupraxia (good praxis)
versus dyspraxia (bad praxis), and it is claimed here that instead of reflecting and referencing hierarchical models of participation (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) or non-hierarchical, more circular (Cornwall, 2008) or circumstances-based models (Kirby et al., 2003), research with young children under five should look for eupraxia because in reality adults are the ones who make the decisions for children’s lives. This asymmetry should be acknowledged in the research process and researchers should respond to the challenges of this asymmetry with eupraxia.

Therefore, the development of participatory research with young children under five seems unfulfilled. Instead researchers should acknowledge there are certain limitations embedded in participation and move beyond ‘hierarchical or not’ models of participation to ethical praxis where the causality between adult actions and children’s actions is the locus of consideration. Thus instead of seeking levels or pieces of a ‘jigsaw’ (Cornwall, 2008), participatory ethical research with children under five should be underpinned by ethical axes. A key consideration of ethical praxis is not just about how we conduct research, but how we consider the different points of views with children as well, and that is quite challenging.

The layers of ethical praxis

Evidence from the data examined in this paper suggested there are six key elements that they should underpin the ethical process at all stages with young children. These elements should unfold as ‘layers’ of ethical commitment from the research design stage, to implementation, analysis, reporting the findings and should be embodied and grounded in the research process. These layers are characterised by fluidity and responsibility of making the invisible risks of participation being a tokenism or illusion of consent visible. It is contended that these layers should be the primacy of ethical praxis.

To begin, the data collected through the three projects demonstrated that in order to achieve ethical praxis in participatory research with young children the first essential layer is to be borrowed by Dussel’s (1997, 1998) work on ethics – intersubjectivity. Dussel described intersubjectivity as a key theme when researching vulnerable people and is related with the procedures for reaching agreement among all involved in the research project. Observational data demonstrated agreement was reached among all participants in all three projects. This involved the children themselves, their parents and the contexts in which the research took place. Further analysis of the agreements/consent raised more questions, however, especially when very young children were involved below the age of three years. In order to achieve agreement/consent a basic element is required and this is self-recognition. Dussel (1997) points out that intersubjectivity requires communication among equals to decide the process of the research and how it will be implemented. In many cases with young children, especially under the age of three, this cannot be feasible; thus as I claimed earlier researchers should seek eupraxia.

In all three projects it was observed that the younger children (especially under three years) appeared to have an understanding of the process in the beginning of the research, but in the duration of the project this understanding was not fulfilled as can be demonstrated in the following dialogue with a two-and-a-half-year-old child in the project Children’s Construction of the Concept of Danger:

Researcher: Do you remember these pictures? (pointing at the pictographic questionnaire which was created in the beginning of the project two months before this interview with the child).
Child: [nodding]
Researcher: Would you like to play with these now?
Child: [nodding again]
Researcher: Great! So when you are outdoors have you had an accident? Fall from a bike? Fall?
Child: Yes, Zeta dropped me a ball and it I fall
Researcher: How did you feel?
Child: Banged my head
Researcher: So which picture is describing how you felt? (showing the child all the agreed upon children pictures to be used in the beginning of the project)
Child: [pause] None. I do not remember.

In this instance although at the outset the researcher felt that all children agreed upon all the pictographic symbols that were used in the questionnaire, the child in the extract above does not appear to have a recollection and thus the agreement of the child has shifted. During the three projects instances like this were observed at a frequency of 65% with children under three years and in a frequency of 46% with children between three and five years. This raises a crucial question in terms of consent. How is intersubjectivity achieved? The data demonstrated that seeking consent from children in the beginning of the project did not necessarily grant the consent of the children throughout the project.

On the basis of this finding, examining the way methods were implemented in the projects I propose that a second layer is important with children under fi ve: indivisibility. This layer of ethical praxis is concerned with the legitimation and value of the research inquiry in terms of the nature of the knowledge that is about to be acquired and the actual beneficiary of this knowledge. The key issue in determining the necessary boundaries of the research inquiry should be determined by three key concerns: whether the nature of the research inquiry violates children’s rights, dignity and privacy. For example, from the self-observation diaries of the three projects it became evident that in cases of unstructured observations in the form of snapshots with children when they were participating in activities the researcher felt it was worth recording, the children themselves at instance felt that their own spaces were invaded as the following quote from a three-year-and-four-month-old boy illustrates:

Child: What are you doing?
Researcher: I am writing down what you just did. It was very interesting.
Child: I do not like it.
(Child stops his activity and walks away)

Observing children is a common method in the field of early childhood; however, it is worth considering that observations of other’s spaces, behaviours, involve a degree of intervention in their lives, and seeking consent as well as negotiating the guidelines with children does not mean that as researcher we do not invade their spaces and in many cases their privacy or dignity.

Data from the self-observation diaries of the three projects revealed that these three key concerns, children’s rights, dignity and privacy, although they had been negotiated in the beginning of the research projects and constantly were reinforced with children offering the opportunity to be observers there was a mismatch of what the children had agreed and the effect the observations had when children were either observed or were observing. Thus further analysis of the data arising from the self-observation diaries, memos and observations was undertaken. As discussed above ethical praxis is based
on actions and their causality, as well as how we practice that conduct from a non-adult-oriented way of thinking what children’s rights are, what is considered as dignified and private. Consequently, the emerging question was how to achieve the creation of ethical spaces for participatory research with children.

This search takes us to the Aristotelian concept of *Phronesis* (the virtue of practical thought) which revolves around the necessity of the research, the exercise of judgement and the respect of the communities within the subject of the inquiry. In order to achieve phronesis in ethical praxis three issues should be addressed that are considered key for the children’s participation: those involved in the research, the decision-making process during the research and how the research is planned. Central to this inquiry are the methods to be used. In all three projects the research designs attempted to use a variety of methods. Analysis of how these methods were used concluded that ethical research with children should always seek for simpler methods where it facilitates the participation of young children. The key issue with very young children, especially babies and toddlers, is how to get them to participate in the research process given their lack of repertoire of language. Traditionally researchers have sought to use hermeneutic approaches when young babies are researched. In these cases, however, still participation is under question and problematic as there is no guarantee of the requirements for the effective notions of ‘listening to children’ as the wishes of the child cannot actively and intentionally tell us what we are looking for. Instead it seems that when researchers interpret hermeneutic approaches they imply that children can be observed if we are good enough to listen. Warming (2005) illustrates this by suggesting a distinction between ‘listening’ as a tool to participation and actually giving voices to children. A number of researchers have discussed the use of ‘participatory’ methods with young children (Caody, 2001; Carr, Jones, & Lee, 2005; Clark, 2005a, 2005b; Cook & Hess, 2007; Coyne, 1998; Dockett, 2008; Emond, 2005; Flewitt, 2005; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Kellet, 2010; Willow, 2002) and suggest that the field of early childhood research is based mainly on adult-designed techniques. Researchers are thus under the illusion of engaging children, when in reality children participate in a manner that reflects adult-oriented activities and actions. I argue, consequentially, that participatory methods may only be an illusion of participation as researchers could end up with false assumptions being made about the child’s behaviour. In that sense researchers need to recognise that there is a degree, or a boundary, of subjectivity based on judgements offered by the adults.

The notion of adult-oriented methods was explored by Stephenson (2009) as being offered as a ‘pack of activities’ where the researcher offers this pack to children to choose as a way of being part of the research. This paper extends this idea and suggests that what it is viewed as participatory methods are based on adult design; thus it is necessary to add another layer to ethical praxis. Instead of the researcher seeking participatory methods, they should also seek a critical examination of these methods. Hence I suggest another layer in the ethical praxis: *parsimony*. As it has been argued so far, achieving participation of young children is important but simplifying the methods does not necessary mean that participation will be achieved fully. I suggest here that the research with young children should seek simplicity in the nature of the research; so the methods that are chosen should depend on how children conceptualise the ontology of the research project and their place within it rather than children understanding only the methods. Data from the self-observation diaries revealed that an obvious problem when children were using the methods was not the impossibility of using the methods effectively but whether they were actively involved and engaged
in using these methods in relation to the purpose of the methods. For example, in the Project Children’s construction of the Concept of Danger, a questionnaire was used. It was aimed to involve the children in the analysis of the data; thus the scale of the questionnaire was simplified and limited only to a scale of four items to be user friendly by the young children. In this project it was evident that children were able to use the methods and participate in the analysis as they had understood the ontological aspects of the project. In that sense parsimony is a fundamental element on what is to be included or excluded in the scope of the research, sharing information at the appropriate level and where the children’s age permits; secondly, understanding that children might prefer different methods from the ones on offer and thirdly, that achieving problem-solving and deciding the choice of methods with the children will lead to the evolution of a new, common understanding. (Palaiologou, 2012b, p. 37)

However, in doing research with children under five, and especially babies and toddlers where cognitive, emotional and social skills are not fully developed, there are pragmatic issues in achieving parsimony. Moreover, throughout this paper I have argued about the asymmetric power relations between children and adults and this cannot be also ignored. Thus analysis of the data revealed another layer: equilibrium. This is a practical approach to ethical praxis where consideration is given to the nature of the research in relation to children’s reactions. Logical judgement is then exercised to assess the degree to which children who participate in the research project are able to be self-conscious are able to recognise or articulate their own situations and to emotionally offer agreement. This layer is related with a consideration of what is possible to be achieved actually with the research and the degree to which children as participants are respected, their dignity is recognised, responsibility is taken to include or exclude current emotions in the scope of research and to reflect on children’s situations and to work together with allies such as parents to try and understand the emotional situation of the children.

The final layer of ethical praxis is the power of interactions and the relationships between researcher and participants. In this sense we accept that children are not equal in terms of power in the project and we may need to acknowledge the subjectively justified alternative judgements offered by adults who are acting in the best interests of the child. As suggested above, if the child cannot be actively involved we might make a false assumption about the child’s well-being. This calls for the enablement of a more adequate supportive praxis in the sense that the true interests of the child are not affected. Typically adults are the ones who pose what is and what should be for children; they are the decision-makers and the planners in the eyes of the children and, as adults, hold different levels of power. For example in the project Children under Five and Digital Technologies it was found that adults had full control of when children will have access to the digital technologies. Although the project attempted to explore how children use digital technologies in reality all their activities were fully managed by adults. In this example children were allowed to use digital devices, but the boundary was shifted from a narrow one of child as decision-maker in order to allow consideration of the wider security of the children. The control and the basic power remained in this instance with the adults as the actors who knew what is ‘best’ for children depending on judgements. This is not necessarily a polemic approach to children’s participation. On the contrary it enables research to be adequately supportive to the well-being of children in a novel (and potentially threatening) situation.
Reflections

On reflection, the ideas explored in this paper aimed to use data from three research projects with children that were using a variety of methods such as narratives and quantitative methods. Traditionally in the body of literature in the field of early childhood research narratives are the dominant methods with young children (Balen et al., 2001; Clark, 2005a, 2005b; Clark & Moss, 2001, 2005; Cook & Hess, 2007; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2006; James, 2007; Jans, 2004; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Waller & Bitou, 2011). What made these three research projects attractive to explore was the attempt to move beyond traditional narrative methods with young children to include methods such as surveys and questionnaires where there has been limited exploration on how ethical participation can be achieved. The key findings were that the researchers should not be ‘afraid’ of using methods in the name of participation, but the research design should be underpinned by ethical praxis. The idea of participatory methods and investigation in the field of early childhood needs further examination, therefore, and we should question further the notion of participation. What I have concluded as a result of this enquiry is that the essential and central element to participation is ethical praxis.

Further analysis of the data revealed that ethical praxis is interdependent on ethical layers. While these might bear resemblance to the existing models of participation discussed above what is suggested here is that these layers are not hierarchical or circular, but are interwoven and inseparable in the research process. There is no linearity or circular relationship among them: they are entwined, intermingled and interconnected. There is interplay among them where ethical praxis looks like a chain of layers matching each other in the centre to form what looks like a twisted ladder in the form of a helix. In order to achieve ethical participation in research with young children all these layers are not unfolding in a ‘smooth’ ‘neat’ way but they are interlocked and interactive to create eupraxia in research.

Discussion

In this paper I have considered participation of young children in research from an ethical angle. I have argued that participation is a complex notion and research with young children should refocus the locus of attention not on methods, but on the union of methodology an ethical praxis under the lenses of ethical layers.

I contend that consent, although valuable, is a top-down adult-invented approach to ethical practice with children under five which I do not consider as sufficient to assure children’s participation as it does not limit the ‘awareness of asymmetric power of relations of children and adults’. A number of other significant factors need to be explored when we are questioning the participation of children in research. I have argued that participation has a number of complexities of ethics and the signed consent form in itself is not an adequate or straightforward approach to ethical research with young children. Research with children and listening to children present both challenges and opportunities. While traditional research with children as participants employs strategies and methods for achieving this, one thing that is becoming clear is that there is a need for all research to be underpinned by ethical commitments throughout the project. Thus it is suggested that ethical praxis requires the engagement of all six layers explained above in order to facilitate participation, rather than limit it. Research where children are perceived as participants is where ethical praxis should be
applied to reclaim the variety of ‘languages’ of children and methods that demonstrate respect for these languages and gives voice to alternative ways of ‘listening’ to children.

All such layers are relevant and necessary when we are researching the lives of very young children. Consequently I have suggested that layers of ethical praxis should guide the research to avoid the illusion of participation and to achieve a ‘dialogue’ that needs to be covered with those children to ensure that the interests of stakeholders of the research are respected and protected. In that sense judgement becomes an essential element on all these layers.

Participation when presented as a set of techniques rather than as a responsible commitment to work with children, it has been argued, may silence alternative methods and ways of doing research with young children. Participation is grounded in concepts of justice, exercise of judgement, autonomy, responsibility, respect and linguistic articulation that are meaningful to all involved. The results of my enquiry suggest that participation should involve elements of emancipation from the premises of the involved children. Decisions, such as what is right for children, what is quality for them and what are the participatory methods, should require that children be given the opportunity of self-recognition and self-consciousness in relation to all these.

Thus children as participants need to be treated not as experts of their own lives – a dominant approach to the vast body of literature on participation of children – but as having expertise of the role they hold in the research project. The measure of children’s involvement should be based on components of their environment, culture, values and beliefs in a pragmatic delivery of the research. In that sense all methods become relevant to research with children and are appropriate when ethical praxis characterises the nature of the project. Consequently researchers should be aware of the visible challenges in a research project such as children’s age, rights, emotions, sociocultural context, but equally important they ought to be aware of the invisible signs such as the effect of adult power, control and decision-making as well as social injustice and inequalities that impact on children’s environments and contexts. The purpose of ethical research with young children is to facilitate these issues by exercising a questioning approach to the nature and causes of the research.

Although consent and seeking simpler methods may reflect participation at a visible level, at an invisible level the barriers achieving the level of trust necessary for ethical praxis is a major responsibility. As participatory researchers we should seek to create supportive spaces for not only allowing participation of children, but collectively processing the challenges of participation. These should always be questioned and negotiated as discourse for the implementation of ethical research with young children.

Conclusions

This paper is not offering a framework approach to research design with young children under five, but a reflection on how we can achieve ethical research with young children. I consider that in the field of early childhood we should move the debate of participation and ethics in research with young children to a point beyond offering descriptive useful methods which, in most cases, are limiting the creation and construction of knowledge. Instead we should extend our thinking to develop a research agenda that problematises ‘participatory’ methods under ethical layers of praxis.

Thus I have debated ideas around ethical considerations that should underpin the research and claim that the key conclusion is to continually create opportunities to confront simplicity of the research in the name of participation. Research with young
children requires both internalisation of ethical praxis and the chance to challenge the research process at all stages. Ethical research should have the flexibility to exercise omissions or make addition to methods without fearing that this will reduce the viability and validity of the research or children’s participation. The key element is always to question whether this will be done in isolation of the reality of the children’s sociocultural contexts.

Finally, I propose that participation of children in research can be achieved not as a simple ekphrasis of involvement of children as this can only be the partial goal, but with commitment to an ethical obligation to act responsibly in a way that is striving to attain causality between actions and understand how these actions affect children through recognition of both the visible and invisible zones of children’s lives.

To conclude, in order to achieve participation with young children it is not just about which methods can be used. Participation of young children can be achieved partially for the reasons explained throughout this paper; thus instead of seeking simplicity of methods that are mainly narratives/hermeneutic, researchers should attempt to explore all methods available. The key issue is that research with young children should be underpinned by ethical praxis. Participation of young children in research is not about the children themselves using the methods, but about ethical praxis that unfolds in the research process.

Notes on contributor
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