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Children as Experts in Their Lives: Child Inclusive Research

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The focus of this special volume of CSI on research *with* and *by* children reflects a major paradigm shift in child research - a shift from a focus on the child as *object of* to a focus on the child as *subject* (and actor) *in* research (see Mason and Hood 2010). In his lead article in the first issue of this journal (2008), Asher Ben-Arieh highlighted the way in which the child indicators movement reflects this paradigm shift, outlining the way in which new directions in measuring and monitoring child well-being were leading to new roles for children in this process. He noted the importance of including children's own perspectives on their well-being and argued that 'incorporating children's subjective perceptions is both a pre-requisite and a consequence of the changes historically in the measuring and monitoring of child well-being' (p.13). This special issue again takes up this agenda of the child as subject in research.

The importance of including children as subjects whose perspectives are heard in matters concerning them is gaining momentum within child research. This perspective was acknowledged when it was decided that the 2009 Child Indicators Conference[1] would be preceded by a Symposium 'Children as experts in their lives: Child inclusive research.' This special edition publishes articles based on the two plenary sessions of the Symposium as well as articles drawn from contributed papers that were presented at the one-day event.

In welcoming conference delegates to the Symposium, Jan Mason, as Symposium convener, highlighted the considerable strides made in the last fifteen years in

[1]Co-hosted by ISCI and the Social Justice Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

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bringing children's voices into research on childhood. The contributed papers in this volume provide examples of the ways in which children's voices make contributions to knowledge for policy and practice, through the inclusion of children and young people as subjects in research. Jan also noted that questions remain about the extent to which children and young people, particularly children, can be assisted to take a leadership role in deciding what they want researched, and how they want that research conducted and disseminated.The two plenary papers in this volume provide responses to these questions.

Closely associated with valuing children's voices in research is the recognition that understanding children's lives in the here-and-now is an important contribution to child studies. Until relatively recently, much research involving children has been conducted to understand their lives as trajectories moving from infancy to adulthood. Associated with this research approach has been the belief that children move along a continuum from less knowing and competent to more knowing and more competent in managing their circumstances (see James et al. 1998, for example, for an extended discussion of how different research paradigms shape theoretical understandings of children). A research agenda that recognizes children and young people as competent interpreters of their everyday worlds opens up new research spaces for understanding their constructions of their social worlds (Danby 2002, 2009). The focus becomes one of understanding how children live their lives on a daily basis, and what is important for them as their go about their everyday lives in home, school and community.

With a focus on children's everyday lives from their perspectives, a new research agenda is possible. Such an agenda means a reconsideration of research questions, involving adult researchers in considering different theoretical orientations and a program of research activity that engages with the child as researcher (Danby and Farrell 2005). In this conceptualization of the child, the child is constructed not as a 'child' participant, but as a 'research participant' (Danby and Farrell 2005). Susan Danby, as Chair of Mary Kellett's plenary presentation and the panel discussion that followed, drew attention to how conceptualizations of children and young people can construct differing versions of how we understand children's actions and also the institution of childhood. Her challenge to the audience was to consider what a research agenda might look like when the focus was on 'researchers' who happen to be children rather than on 'children as researchers'. In terms of actioning research projects, a very different research agenda can be built when the category of 'child' is not the focus of study, but rather one of 'research participant'. Challenging common-sense constructions of children to now view children as research participants presents a different agenda in terms of how to conduct such research, as well as claims made from such research. Taken together, the plenary and contributed papers, of which this volume is comprised, exemplify the new agenda.

The articles included in this special issue on children engaging as research participants are illustrative of two major themes reflected in the above discussion. The first three papers respond to the first theme of engaging children as research participants, by focusing on children leading in research, illustrating processes by which adult researchers can build bridges that enable children to lead in research on their own lives. Ainslie Yardley provides details of the plenary presentation,which opened the Symposium and discusses how a group of Sydney primary school children responded to the Symposium topic of 'Children as experts in their own

lives'. She outlines the outcomes of a process in which she facilitated the children conveying to the audience what they wanted adult researchers to know about researching with children. In reflecting on the principles of creative collaboration that informed the design and process of this project,Yardley identifies those elements she considers significant for conducting 'child inclusive' research, and the role of the adult researcher in this process.

The invited keynote presentation at the Symposium, from which Mary Kellett's paper is derived, informed discussion on children as leaders in research about their lives. Kellett writes about her experiences in facilitating child-led research, whereby children conduct and present their own research. This paper, in describing the pioneering work of the Children's Research Centre (CRC) at the Open University in the United Kingdom, looks at the Centre's rationale and the issues and challenges that it has confronted. As part of her presentation, Mary included, with prior consent from the authors, a research report written by a small group of children in the UK (J. Bradwell and others), of research they had initiated and conducted. We are pleased to be able to include this paper in this volume, as it was presented at the conference. This example of research in which children led, by setting their research agenda, and conducted the research and presented findings, examines the involvement of 'looked after children' in reviews of their care. The children, in identifying factors relevant to the well-being of children in care, make explicit the central tenet of this special edition and the papers in it, that children's knowledge can make particularly valuable contributions to our understandings of child well-being and the role of indicators in measuring and monitoring this well-being.

Also in relation to the first theme of this special issue, children as research participants, two Australian papers (Dockett; Moore, Saunders & McArthur) reflect on bringing children's voices into research and the challenges posed by this enterprise. Both papers draw on their authors' experiences of researching with groups of children and young people who can be regarded as particularly vulnerable - very young children (Dockett) and marginalized children (Moore et al.). The authors of both papers indicate how their work is underlined by assumptions about children's rights and agency. Sue Dockett, in confirming that children as young as four can be meaningfully involved in assenting to (or declining from) involvement in research, extends understanding of this process. She identifies the importance of context in facilitating or circumscribing young children's participation in research and the role of information and social relations in defining this context. Tim Moore, Vicky Saunders and Morag McCarthur argue in their paper that their research experiences show that children and young people contribute valuable knowledge about their lives, even when their participation in research has been constrained by context and social relations. Additionally, they identify the extent to which children and young people can make important contributions about the process for researching with children.

The final four papers in this volume (Bolzan & Gale; Harju & Thorød; Rasmusson; and Thoilliez) speak to the second theme of this special issue, focusing on research that explores children's knowledge of their lives and refers to its significance for the development of policy. This theme was also particularly clear in the paper by Bradwell and co-authors, referred to earlier. As children in the UK care system, they conducted research in which children in this system were research participants. In reporting on this research the authors emphasized the extent to which

children value times when adults take account of their views, when making decisions about their lives. They also identified problems associated with their lack of control in the review decision-making process and specify changes that could make this process work more effectively in their interests.

The paper by Natalie Bolzan and Fran Gale identifies ways in which young people in Australia can be marginalized by adults, through an institutionalized dualism, which has the effect of polarizing adults as superior in competency to young people and thereby limits opportunities for 'unexpected' contributions from young people to their communities. Anne Harju and Anne-Brita Thorød, in their paper, illustrate how hearing directly from children about the experiences of living in poverty in Sweden and Norway can inform policies developed for families in poverty. They illustrate that when policymakers focus on adults in poor families they fail to take account of the impact of poverty on the lives and experiences of children. Bodil Rasmusson's paper reports on a study in which both children and adults were interviewed on the effectiveness of Children's Advocacy Centres in Sweden. This study illustrates the complexities of developing child protection policies and practices within a rights framework that is attentive to the rights of both children and adults. Their discussion also indicates how, for individual children in the system, their lack of power as children can result in decision making which is questionable in terms of pursuing children's best interests.

The last paper in this volume, by Bianca Thoilliez, identifies the significance of subjective contributions from children in informing on the inter-subjective nature of the concept of happiness in developing educational policy in Spain. Additionally, Bianca highlights that, when children are listened to, they emphasise the complexity of the concept of happiness. For example, she notes that when education policy is constructed to maximize children's experiences of happiness, it risks ignoring that children tell us that unhappy experiences in the present can contribute to experiences of happiness in the longer term.

Taken as a whole, the papers in this volume inform us that, in acknowledging children as knowledgeable about their own lives and in implementing methodologies to facilitate this process, adult researchers are putting in place elements for facilitating children contributing to policies to improve children and young people's well-being. These papers also flag issues indicating that there is still a considerable distance to go in implementing research and utilizing its outcomes in ways that actually contribute to making differencesin the lives of children. Further, as young people stated in a presentation to the ACWA (Association of Child Welfare Agencies) 2010 conference, including children and young people in research as experts in their own lives is important, but it is not enough. The young people at that presentation urged adult researchers and policymakers to take action to bring about changes based on children and young people's knowledge. They concluded their presentation with the directive to adult researchers and policymakers that 'Actions speak louder than words so get out there and make change'.

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"Young Consultants Presentation, ACWA (Association of Child Welfare Agencies) Conference 2010, CREATE Young Consultants"