

Listening to Children: Exploring Intuitive Strategies and Interactive Methods in a Study of Children's Special Places

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Published online: 7 November 2012
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Abstract Stemming from the UNCRC, childhood researchers have proposed a variety of methodological strategies for upholding children's rights and understanding their perspectives. This paper aims to advance the conversation on engaging children's perspectives by presenting data collection methods used in a qualitative study exploring children's special places. Place attachment and identity theories, as well as, contemporary sociological understandings, informed the study design, particularly, in viewing children as active agents continually constructing their own places in the world. Five interactive methods (book discussions, representational art, child-led place tours, informal interviews, and puppets) are presented in order to emphasize the importance of listening to children, building positive relationships, allowing children to take the lead, and fostering creative expression. While it may never be possible for the adult researcher to fully understand children's perspectives, it is possible for researchers to implement intuitive strategies by reflectively adapting their methods to honor children's diverse needs.

Keywords Children's perspectives · Special places · Intuitive strategies · Puppets · Artistic representations · Child-led tours

Résumé S'appuyant sur la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant des Nations Unies, des chercheurs sur l'enfance ont proposé une variété de stratégies méthodologiques, pour soutenir les droits des enfants et comprendre leurs perspectives. Cet article a pour but de faire avancer la discussion sur l'implication des perspectives des enfants en présentant les méthodes de cueillette de données utilisées dans une étude qualitative explorant des lieux spéciaux pour les enfants. Les théories de l'attachement et de l'identité à un lieu ainsi que des perspectives sociologiques

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contemporaines ont orienté le devis de l'étude, notamment la perception des enfants comme des agents actifs continuellement en train de construire leur propre place dans le monde. Cinq méthodes interactives : discussions sur des livres, art figuratif, visites de lieux guidées par les enfants, interviews informelles et marionnettes sont présentées pour souligner l'importance d'écouter les enfants, de construire des relations positives, de permettre aux enfants de prendre la direction, et de favoriser l'expression créatrice. Même s'il peut ne jamais être possible pour le chercheur adulte de comprendre totalement le point de vue des enfants, les chercheurs peuvent néanmoins établir des stratégies intuitives en adaptant de façon réflexive des méthodes qui respectent les différents besoins des enfants.

Resumen Partiendo en la UNCRIC, investigadores en el área de la educación infantil han propuesto una variedad de estrategias metodológicas, relacionadas con la defensa de los derechos de los niños y la comprensión de sus perspectivas. Este artículo busca avanzar en la conversación sobre el compromiso de las perspectivas de los niños, a través de la presentación de métodos de colección de información usados en un estudio cualitativo que explora los lugares especiales de los niños. La cercanía con un espacio y las teorías de identidad, así como perspectivas sociológicas contemporáneas fueron empleadas en el diseño de este estudio, particularmente, en la tarea de percibir a los niños como agentes activos que continuamente construyen sus propios espacios en el mundo. Cinco métodos interactivos (discusión de lecturas de libros, arte representativo, tours guiados por los niños, entrevistas informales y marionetas) se presentan para enfatizar la importancia que tiene el escuchar a los niños, el construir relaciones positivas, el permitir a los niños asumir roles de liderazgo y el promover expresiones creativas. Aunque probablemente nunca sea posible para los investigadores adultos el llegar a entender por completo las perspectivas de los niños, sí es posible para los investigadores, el implementar estrategias intuitivas adaptando sus métodos en honor a las diversas necesidades de los niños.

Introduction

Understanding children's connection to place is important in discovering their perspectives of the world. In fact, exploring a child's place identity, or the "physical-world socialization of the child" is crucial in considering not only how physical settings affect the growth and development of children, but also how children shape and influence the physical environment as they grow and develop (Proshansky and Fabian 1987, p. 22). From this premise, research aimed at discovering children's connection to place must be designed in order to capture children's perspectives of places.

The aim of this paper is to present data collection methods used in a qualitative study exploring 3–5-year-old children's special places in the home environment. The procedures for data collection employed during the research were constructed in order to include children in the research process, as opposed to methods of inquiry done to children. Young children desire to have their creative ideas and

thoughts heard. Multiple strategies were conceived in order to provide them with opportunities to talk about, represent, and show the places that were special to them.

The methods presented in this paper stem from an understanding of the importance of place in children's lives as well as viewing children as competent citizens who are actively creating their own worlds (Corsaro 2005), existent within yet distinct from the adult world. Indeed, while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) set precedence for children's citizenship and rights of participation recognized under international law (United Nations 1989, 2005), children have also voiced their own views as to what their rights should entail. Common visions shared by children across the world, suggests an inclusive citizenry entailing (1) participation and liberty to "express opinions, be listened to, make choices," (2) protection and "to be treated fairly," and (3) provision, including care and a healthy environment (Taylor and Smith 2009, p. 171). The methods developed for the study were intended to uphold children's rights and based on the belief that children's perspectives, actions, expressions, and interactions toward their social and physical environments offer unique insights to salient aspects of their lives.

Stemming from the UNCRC, childhood researchers have proposed a variety of methodological strategies and theoretical frameworks to address issues surrounding children's rights and to understand children's perspectives. Ethical questions have been raised regarding informed consent, confidentiality, protection, and power imbalances between the adult researcher and children participants (Conroy and Harcourt 2009; Einarsdóttir 2007; Punch 2002). A variety of relational approaches have been proposed to address these concerns emphasizing the importance of listening to children, establishing trust, creating a comfortable environment, and engaging children in fun and interactive activities (Clark 2005; Einarsdóttir et al. 2009; Parkinson 2001). This paper aims to advance the conversation about research with young children by reflecting on interactive methods developed in a dissertation study designed to understand young children's connection with place (Green 2011). "Reflexivity should be a central part of the research process with children, where researchers critically reflect not only on their role and their assumptions, but also on the choice of methods and their application" (Punch 2002, p. 323).

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by theories from the field of environmental psychology, particularly place attachment and place identity as fundamental concepts for place research. Proshansky and Fabian (1987) defined place identity, a substructure of self-identity, as:

cognitions about the physical environment that also serve to define who the person is...The cognitions are represented as thoughts, memories, beliefs, values, ideas, preferences, and meanings relating to all the important settings of the person's daily life, past as well as present...Place-identity cognitions monitor the person's behavior and experience in the physical world (pp. 22–23).

Place attachment, an aspect of place identity, was conceptualized as the positive bond that a person develops towards a place (Low and Altman 1992). Sometimes referred to as a sense of place (Hay 1998), it usually embodies an emotional attachment (Low and Altman 1992), as well as, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions toward a particular place (Proshansky et al. 1983; Scannell and Gifford 2010). Hence, the study was designed to learn about the places that children identified with and their feelings and behaviors toward those places.

An individual may have multiple place identities, specific to the social and physical setting of each particular place in their lives (Devine-Wright and Clayton 2010). In addition, changes in place identity occur throughout one's lifetime, with early childhood being the period when more stable aspects of one's place identity are developed (Proshansky and Fabian 1987). For instance, a child might develop an attachment to a place beside a river near their family home. Their chosen space next to the river may provide the child with a sense of place where they experience the restorative aspects of the natural environment. Eventually, the child's family may relocate and the child will no longer have physical access to that particular place. However, that early attachment may continue to inform the child's place identity, as one that values and appreciates the natural environment. While at the same time other experiences, as well as social and cultural constructions of place will continue to shape and build upon the child's place identity and their engagement with physical settings. As an adult they may choose to live near the mountains, partly influenced by their childhood place attachment as well as other experiences, in which imparted an appreciation for a more rugged and rocky terrain.

Therefore, while place theories were used as a framework for understanding the importance of places in children's lives, contemporary sociological understandings were also essential in conceiving research strategies that recognized the evolving nature of place identity and children's agency in constructing their place in the world (Qvortrup et al. 2009; Corsaro 2005). Therefore, the children in the study were not viewed as passive bystanders developing into fully competent adults. Rather, they were considered competent social actors "active in the construction of their own lives, and the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (James and Prout 1990, p. 8). In considering children's agency, it was also important to consider their subordinate position in the adult world. Therefore, children's power and rights were taken into account in relation to other generational groups within society (Qvortrup et al. 2009; Corsaro 2005). Families influence children's experiences because they make decisions about the types of environments in which children are exposed (Corsaro 2005). Furthermore, children's experiences are culturally positioned; therefore, the methods in the study were designed considering the social, familial, cultural, and environmental features that contribute to children's connection to places in their day-to-day lives.

Children's Place Research

Past research exploring preschool children's special places is limited. Studies have investigated children's places in outdoor settings (Hart 1979; Kirkby 1989; Kjørholt

2003; Sobel 2002), middle childhood experiences (Kylin 2003; Kjørholt 2003; Sobel 2002), and within preschool environments (Lowry 1993; Maxwell et al. 2008, Skånfors et al. 2009; Zeegers et al. 1994). Hart's (1979) foundational study of *Children's Experience of Place* revealed children's need for quiet places, places to hide, and places to experiment with objects in their environment. Research on children's outdoor forts and hide-outs have alluded to the importance of children's construction of places for role-playing and creating secret manageable worlds separate from adults (Kjørholt 2003; Kylin 2003; Maxwell et al. 2008; Sobel 2002). In addition, studies in preschool settings revealed children's selection of small spaces to gain a sense of privacy or participate in exclusive social play (Lowry 1993; Skånfors et al. 2009). Although children in previous research mentioned special places located in and around their homes, prior to this investigation, none had specifically investigated children's special places within the home environment.

Conceiving Strategies to Engage Young Children

While past research suggested some useful methods for investigating place, none of the methodologies were completely fitting for the age of the children in the study or for use within the home environment. Therefore, one of the first challenges was to conceive interactive data collection methods suitable for the inquiry.

The first challenge centered on the question of how to introduce the concept of special places without influencing the places that the children selected. While special places have generally been characterized as spaces that children carve out or claim in the physical environment, the intention was to allow room for children to conceptualize their own meaning of special places. Given that young children are concrete learners, it was important to provide them with something tangible as a basic starting point for understanding the concept.

Furthermore, the goal was to develop fun data collection activities in order to engage children in sharing their perspectives. Given the tendency of children to "talk while they are doing," Parkinson (2001) suggested using active rather than passive activities for engaging young children (p. 145). By developing methods that were interesting and exciting, the intention was to provide children with a comfortable environment in order to reduce the awkwardness between the researched and the researcher (Einarsdóttir 2007; Parkinson 2001; Punch 2002), and to gain acceptance in their worlds as an adult friend (Corsaro 2005).

Finally, because past studies have alluded to the secretive nature of special places (Hart 1979; Kjørholt 2003; Kylin 2003; Sobel 2002), it was anticipated that some children might choose not to share their places. Therefore, in recognizing the power imbalance between the adult researcher and children (Corsaro 2005) and the ethical concerns surrounding treating children fairly and preserving their rights to privacy (Taylor and Smith 2009), another goal was to develop strategies that provided children with choices as to whether or not they wanted to share. As Einarsdóttir (2007) articulated, "Balance between protection and participation are... dilemmas that one faces when doing research with young children" (p. 2).

The aim of this paper is to present five interactive methods for engaging children's perspectives in early childhood research. The advantages, limitations, and possibilities of each method are presented in order to prompt early childhood researchers to critically reflect on research strategies that not only provide children with a sense of agency but also seek to honor and protect their rights.

Methodology

The study embraced what Merriam (2002) defined as an “interpretive qualitative study” in which the “researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, the meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (p. 6). Multiple methods were devised in the context of two relevant places in the children's daily lives: at school and at home. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with 20 children a year prior to the study to test and refine the research methods. The research was initiated at school and included 31 three-to-five-year-old children (15 girls and 16 boys). The inquiry began with a puppet show to introduce the researcher and describe the data collection activities to the children. Conversations elicited through book discussions with small groups and individuals and children's descriptions of their special place representations were collected at school. Next, home visits were conducted with eight children (three boys and five girls), which included child-led special place tours coupled with informal child interviews, and informal parent interviews-used sparingly to supplement the data collected from the children. In addition, observational field notes were taken throughout the study in order to note children's responses, body language, behavior, and interactions with others.

These strategies were chosen because of their interpersonal nature and their appropriateness for research with young children. Each source of data added more depth to answering the research questions. In addition, puppets, songs, and dance were also used intuitively as tools of engagement, with special attention devoted to the unique interactions between the researcher and the children and different contextual situations. Table 1 provides an overview of the advantages, limitations, and possibilities of the interactive methods presented in this paper. In the following sections, these methods are further described and related to childhood research literature.

Book Discussions

While developing the study, a children's book was sought that would serve the purpose of introducing and asking children about their special places. Studies have shown that storybooks and pictures are an effective means of soliciting personal responses from young children. Torr (2007) found that children actively drew on their own lived experiences to reflect on the meanings they encountered in books. “These connections allow children to move beyond the frame provided by the text,

Table 1 Interactive research methods for children: advantages, limitations, and possibilities

Research strategy	Advantages	Limitations	Possibilities
Children's book discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Books can provide a context for introducing a research topic •Pictures and stories can assist children in reflecting on personal meanings •Children socially construct understanding in group discussions •Sharing in a story multiple times can provide more insight into children's perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Opportunities to share may be limited by outspoken peers during group discussions •Children may imitate meanings found in a book •Book discussions with adults may influence children's responses aimed at pleasing adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Frame more one-on-one interactions especially with young children to ensure equal opportunities to speak •Limit adult interference by creating peer group discussions •Include a variety of data collection strategies
Representational descriptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Art is a tool for generating meaning •Developmentally appropriate artistic activities can be fun and engaging for children •Children's descriptions of their artistic works provide insight into their perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Peers or adults may influence the content of children's art •Children may try to construct what they perceive the researcher wants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Allow opportunities for multiple artistic expressions •Include a variety of data collection strategies
Child-led special place tours and informal child interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tours allow opportunities for children to show something that can't be explained •Being the guide provides children with a sense of empowerment •Children enjoy having someone visit who is interested in what is important to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Adults may be intrusive to children's privacy •Young children may have difficulties explaining their own feelings and behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Allow children to set their own rules and guidelines •Parents may help children feel more comfortable with an adult researcher •When it comes to protecting children's rights, adult researchers should set limits in their pursuit of understanding •Rely on both children's verbal and non-verbal forms of communication

Table 1 continued

Research strategy	Advantages	Limitations	Possibilities
Informal Interviews with parents and caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Parents and caregivers may provide insight about phenomena in children's day-to-day lives not observed by the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Adult reports can differ significantly from children's 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Parental or caregiver data should be used sparingly and should not provide voice for children •It is important to distinguish between adult and children's perspectives
Puppets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Puppets can be used as a tool for introduction and gaining children's interests •Children often view puppets as peers. Therefore, children are more likely to engage in conversations with puppets •Puppets may help the researcher establish a friendly relationship with children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Puppets may be used unethically to coerce children into something they don't fully understand •Puppets are not always appropriate to use in every situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Puppets should be used ethically and with integrity •Researchers should tune-into children's needs and use puppets only when appropriate

in order to recontextualise the meanings in personally significant ways” (Torr 2007, p. 78). Others have successfully used interviews utilizing pictures as aids (Palmer 1994) and responses from reading a story to small groups of children (Whiren 1995).

After discovering that a book did not exist that would serve the purpose of introducing the topic, a children's book was written to provide the children with examples of special places that they could relate to and to invite them to share about their own. The places selected for the book were based on the researcher's personal observations as a parent and a teacher of young children, and ideas generated from other parents and grandparents. A professional artist was hired through a research grant to illustrate the book.

The book, titled *My own Special Place*, consists of eleven pages of illustrations of outdoor and indoor special places. An even number of boys and girls from a variety of ethnic backgrounds are depicted as well as diverse home settings. Some of the illustrations, however, may be biased towards a mountain landscape with many pictures including mountains, pines, and plains in the background. Figure 1 shows an illustration in the book. In order to show the children that not everyone has a special place and to promote choice, a page was created, with a little boy shrugging his shoulders, which reads, “Malik doesn't have a special place, but that's okay.” To stimulate discussion, the last page of the book prompts readers with the question: “Where is your special place?”



Fig. 1 An example of a special place found in *My Own Special Place*

My Own Special Place was read to small groups consisting of one to three children at school in order to introduce the concept and to begin exploring the children's special place locations and experiences. Readings and discussions occurred in the classroom during "free-choice" time. The children were invited to share in the story and talk about their special places. They were encouraged to interject their own thoughts anytime during the story rather than withholding comments until the very end. Depending on the nature of the discussions and their willingness to share, they were asked other questions about their experiences. These questions focused on their place activities, companions, and feelings.

Small groups were allowed to form naturally allowing children choice in their participation and to insure that no child was made to feel excluded. However, individual book discussions encouraged more detailed and personal sharing. Whereas, in groups the children would often become frustrated by outspoken peers who provided them with limited opportunities to speak. The children were encouraged to share in the story multiple times. In fact, with each discussion, most children revealed more details regarding their special places.

In positioning the book discussions between an adult and children, there is the risk that "children may try to 'second guess' what adults hope they will say," by phrasing answers to please adults (Clark 2005, p. 492). One possible way to address this concern may be found in structuring child-to-child discussions and limiting interactions with adults (Clark 2005). However, there is likely to be some diversity in the way in which children respond to this technique. Shyer children may or may not respond better with peers than with adults.

In addition, there is also the risk that children may copy the examples provided in a book. However, in the study only one child repeated a special place from the book, all of the other children named their own places. Researchers should be aware of this concern. Quite possibly the risk of children imitating the content of a book may depend on the context of the story. Therefore, including multiple strategies, in addition to book discussions, will assist researchers in validating the accuracy of their findings.

Representational Descriptions

Artistic representations were also used as a prompt at school for the children to share about their special places. “Like language, art is a symbol system that can be used to generate meaning” (Isenberg and Jalongo 2001, p. 106). While the children created their representations they were asked to describe them in order to “record the journey of their constructions of meaning.” (Einarsdóttir et al. 2009, p. 219).

Several developmentally appropriate choices were provided which allowed the children to choose how they wanted to represent their special places, including: drawing, painting, molding, or building. These activities were selected because they were fun and interactive and as Clark (2005) noted among some of children’s favorite school activities. An alternative activity was also offered providing them with choice as to whether or not they wanted to create a representation. The focus was not on the children’s artistic abilities, whether it was on the meaning making process connected with their activities. Therefore, attention was placed on listening to children while they created their representations, in order to gain insight into their perspectives (Clark 2005; Cox 2005; Einarsdóttir 2007; Einarsdóttir et al. 2009).

The representational activity proved successful for engaging children in the research process, shifting the responsibility of interpreting art to the children rather than the researcher (Clark 2005; Einarsdóttir et al. 2009). A sense of excitement buzzed throughout the classroom, as children painted, molded, drew, and built their special places and eagerly shouted across the room for the researcher to come and see what they had created. Many of the children choose to create their places in several forms, although painting and molding with play dough were the most popular methods (see Fig. 2). It should be noted that while an increasing amount of literature supports children’s drawings as a research method (Clark 2005; Cox 2005; Einarsdóttir 2007; Einarsdóttir et al. 2009; Punch 2002), painting may provide an equally if not more effective means for engaging young children who are still developing their fine motor skills. In addition, providing choices can account for different preferences and abilities among diverse children.

Childhood researchers should be aware that peer and/or adult influence might provide limitations in using art as a data collection strategy. Children can be easily influenced by the activities of others around them (Einarsdóttir et al. 2009). In addition, they may try to construct what they perceive the researcher wants, rather than an authentic expression of the subject matter. Some of these limitations may be overcome by including multiple strategies for children to share their perspectives of the studied phenomenon and by comparing their responses across multiple data sets.



Fig. 2 A young child's representation of her special place on her "big bed"

Child-led Special Place Tours and Informal Interviews

Visits to children's places have provided an effective means for gathering rich detailed data about children's experiences (Hart 1979; Kjørholt 2003; Kylan 2003; Sobel 2002). Tours provide children with opportunities to show places that are impossible to explain out of context. In the study, child-led special place tours were included along with conversations with children. As the children pointed out places around their homes, the researcher listened intently to the descriptions of their activities and questioned them about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

It was difficult, however, for the young children to articulate their feelings and explain their own behavior (Piaget 1936/1952). When asked why they liked certain places, they often answered, "because", "they are fun", or "we just like it". Therefore, understanding was gleaned through "listening" to both children's verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Clark 2005). Clark (2005) described listening as an interactive process for gaining children's perspectives; it involves "hearing, interpreting, and constructing meanings" (p. 491). The special place tours resembled "show and tell", with children pointing out and talking about all the places important to them. In addition, time limitations were not placed on the tours; they concluded when the children decided they were finished.

Most of the children expressed excitement in having someone visit who was interested in learning more about their ideas and perspectives. Along with showing their places, they shared special toys and activities that they enjoyed doing. This method empowered the children; rarely do children have adults visit their homes who are undividedly interested in what is important to them.

Visiting children's special places also had its limitations. A few of the children were initially shy; they were surprised to see an adult from school come to their home. One child hid behind his mother's leg, appearing distrustful of an adult visitor. This created an ethical dilemma, forcing a decision as to whether or not to pursue or dismiss the particular inquiry. In the end, his mother helped him feel comfortable by tagging along on the tour. After a while he warmed up and became

engaged in playing hide and seek. He gained control in the game by keeping the adults in suspense about where he would go next.

An important strategy is to allow children to set their own rules and guidelines, allowing them to set the parameters on how and what they want to share (Punch 2002; Parkinson 2001). In some circumstances, including parents can be beneficial in establishing a comfortable environment, especially when working with young children. Including family members in research also supports children's desire for protection (Taylor and Smith 2009).

Another concern had to do with children's rights to privacy and private spaces (Punch, 2002). Because children are typically treated as subordinate beings in an adult world, the children may have felt like they *had to* disclose their secret spaces, when perhaps, they did not want to. At school, one boy talked about his place inside a large antique wooden chest. During his home visit, he demonstrated how he liked to crawl inside and close the top over him. Afterwards, his father, worried that he might not be able to get out, prohibited him from entering his place again. Thus, the research inquiry had caused a place that used to be secretive and special to be transparent and forbidden.

Childhood researchers walk a dangerous line between expanding knowledge and exploiting childhood secrets. In viewing children as citizens, one has an ethical duty to protect their rights to privacy and to preserve the innocent nature of childhood. It is important for researchers to tune-into the needs of children and to set limits on how far to pursue understanding. When some children provided verbal or non-verbal clues that they did not want to reveal some of their places, the researcher dismissed the matter and did not pursue it further.

Informal Interviews with Parents or Caregivers

Childhood place researchers have argued that using parental or family data is important in considering the development of preferences for places "within the holistic context of the family system" (Chawla 1992, p. 84; Hart 1979). Parental interviews were included in the study because parents provided some insight regarding the nature of special places in the children's day-to-day lives. While the tours offered visual understandings of the physical characteristics of their places, they seldom provided an opportunity for viewing the children authentically using their spaces. Parents, on the other hand, provided their perspectives of how the children played and interacted in these places on a normal basis.

While some parental data were utilized in the study, their views were used cautiously, taking into consideration Corsaro's (2005) warning that researchers "must also remember that parental and other caretaker reports on children's behaviors, beliefs, and values may differ considerably from reports by children themselves" (p. 47). Therefore, parents were not used to provide voice for the children, rather their insights were utilized to support findings discovered directly from the children. In addition, care was taken to position parental data, as perspectives gleaned from parents, not children.

Informal parental interviews typically occurred after the children's special place tours. However, due to the nature of the study and age of the children, many parents chose to accompany their children on the tours, which presented both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, having parents on tour seemed to create a comfortable environment for the children. In addition, sometimes parents offered insight that could only be gleaned through being in or near a particular place. On the other hand, in some situations parents were too generous in offering their perspectives, diverting attention from the children. When this happened, efforts were made to refocus attention toward the children by asking the children questions about their places and activities. Furthermore, perhaps, some children felt uncomfortable sharing some places because they wanted to keep them a secret from their parents or, perhaps, the children responded in ways that parents expected. However, it is important to note that in the study many children felt comfortable showing and talking about places unanticipated by parents, demonstrating that even in the presence of parents children were not reluctant to share their perspectives. Researchers who study children within the home environment must take the inclusion of parents into consideration.

Puppets, Songs, and Dance as Intuitive Strategies

Puppets were used to introduce the study to the children, gain their interest, and help establish a positive relationship with them. As competent citizens, children have the right to be informed about and given choices as to whether or not they want to participate in research (Conroy & Harcourt 2009). During the introduction, a conversation with a puppet was used to explain the researcher's role, describe the purpose of the study, and the activities that would take place. The children were informed of their rights to refuse, at anytime, to participate in the activities or the research study. In addition, they were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research.

Conroy and Harcourt (2009) argued that "the language used to introduce and explain the research project must be situated within the child's sphere of understanding" (p.161). Puppets are effective tools for introducing research and initiating conversations with children; they can "provide a stimulus for talk" and gain children's attention (Simon et al. 2008, p. 1245).

The personas of the puppets were silly, witty, and cheerful; at times they sung familiar songs with the children. Researchers have found that children are more likely to view puppets as peers rather than authority figures (Belohlawek et al. 2010; Simon et al. 2008). Subsequently, children, even shy children, are more inclined to engage in conversations with puppets than with adults (Luckenbill 2011; Keogh and Naylor 2009). Furthermore, they may feel more comfortable expressing ideas to puppets rather than adults, in fear that adults may judge them if they present something incorrect (Keogh and Naylor 2009; Simon et al. 2008).

In the study, the children responded to the puppets with excitement. The friendly relationship that had been established with the puppets also extended toward the researcher. The children greeted and appeared happy to see the researcher each time

she entered the classroom. They persistently asked to see the puppets, so occasionally and spontaneously the researcher would pull one out and interact with them. In addition, because of the friendly relationship that had been formed, the children began to invite the researcher into their social world. On one occasion, the researcher found herself immersed in their play activity, spinning in circles with five four-year-old girls dancing to Celtic music.

The use of puppets in research with young children may provide a means to help mitigate the power imbalance between the adult researcher and children participants. On the other hand, if puppets are not used ethically and honestly they could be used as a tool to coerce children into something they do not fully understand. Therefore, researchers should use puppets cautiously and with integrity.

Concluding Discussion

The multiple methods discussed in this paper offer several advantages for engaging young children's perspectives and honoring and upholding children's rights within an interpretive qualitative approach. Outlined below are some benefits of the presented methods discussed within the framework of children's expressed rights (Taylor and Smith 2009).

First, the methods were designed to encourage children to be active agents throughout the research process. Indeed, opportunities to express their own views and make choices are at the forefront of children's participatory rights (Taylor and Smith 2009; United Nations 1989, 2005). Therefore, participatory methods must be framed in such a way to allow children to take the lead (Sommer et al. 2010). All of the methods were initiated with prompts or questions in order to focus on the subject matter of interest (i.e., special places). After which the organization of the method was allowed to flow naturally. For example, conversations were framed around the children's responses and expressions; there was no time limits placed on any of the activities; and the children led the special place tours in whatever manner they desired. The researcher aimed to provide the children with a sense of control throughout the research process in order to honor their rights to liberty, respect their competency, and encourage them to express what's important to them.

Second, children want to be treated fairly and protected from harm. Therefore, the researcher must consider the ethics involved in conducting research with young children. In this study, interactive strategies (i.e., puppets) were used to introduce children to the research. In addition, much care was taken in all the methods to honor children's rights for privacy. During book discussions, conversations emerged based on what the children elected to share. Children took the lead during the special place tours, by choosing the places they wanted to show. Parents were invited to participate at the level in which children desired, helping the children feel comfortable and safe during home visits.

Third, children desire a caring and healthy environment. The methods in this paper were designed to foster a caring, positive, and fun relationship between the researcher and the children. Since meaning is mediated through the researcher in an interpretive study, it is important to establish a relationship with children, which in

turn, builds a sense of trust, opens communication, and provides a willingness to share. The wittiness of the puppets helped the children be at ease and perceive the researcher as a friend (Corsaro 2005). As such, they were eager to engage in other activities (i.e., the book discussions, the artistic representations, and the home visits), indicating that young children respond positively to researchers who are willing to interact at their level, in other words, adults who are not afraid to sing songs and be silly.

Finally, while many advantages are outlined for using multiple methods in a qualitative interpretive study, the researcher must consider that not every method is appropriate for every child in every situation. In fact, during the study, different situational contexts, social relationships, particularly between the children and researcher, and the dispositions of the children created variances between engaging children's perspectives. For this reason, an argument is made for the necessity of *intuitive strategies*, defined as ever changing adaptations made by the researcher during the research process. As Einarsdóttir (2007) explained, "Researchers who conduct research with children have to be creative and use methods that fit the circumstances and the children they are working with each time" (p. 207). Indeed, respecting children's individuality and preferences is essential in studies with young children.

Intuitive strategies should be implemented in such a way to recognize the diversity of children, environments, and social contexts. Each special place tour unfolded differently, just as each child's representation, each unique conversation during the book discussions, and each unique interaction with the puppets. Therefore, interactive methods should be designed with an element of openness, requiring flexibility from the researcher to best meet the needs of every child. At times this might necessitate setting limits on the pursuit of knowledge in order to protect children's rights to privacy. Through tuning-into the needs of the children, the researcher provides opportunities for children to tailor methods in their own unique ways.

Final Thoughts

Research aimed at understanding children's perspectives is not only important in learning about the salient aspects of children's everyday lives, it is also pertinent in fostering vision for the future. The livelihood of humanity and the sustainability of our planet rests in the hands of children as the next generation of creative change agents. If the current dominant cultural mindset could solve the problems that exist in our world today, then we would live in a perfect society. Indeed, we need innovative perspectives, new ways of thinking about our tomorrow, and ultimately, citizens who are empowered and believe that their thoughts and actions can make a difference.

While the UNCRC set legal precedence for protecting children's rights around the world, it is our duty, as childhood educators, researchers, parents, and caregivers, to nurture and protect children and make certain that their voices are heard. Therefore, methods and strategies aimed at understanding children's

perspectives should emphasize the importance of listening to children, building positive relationships and trust, allowing children to take the lead, and fostering creative expression. In addition, children need to know that their thoughts and perspectives matter, offering children multiple methods in which to express their views communicates that the researcher cares about what they believe.

Finally, early childhood research methods must take into account positioning, by considering both the researchers' and the children's various backgrounds and the social, cultural, environmental contexts that influence their behaviors and beliefs. Intuitive strategies can be implemented as a means for considering the individuality of a child, the situational contexts, and the relationship that is forged between a child and the researcher. While early childhood educators have long recognized the importance of flexibility in their day-to-day interactions with children, early childhood researchers must continue to explore the effectiveness of similar adaptive efforts in their own research practices. Finally, it is critical for early childhood researchers to continue to recognize their own subjectivities, in effort to set aside their own adult perspectives in an attempt to view the world through the eyes of a child. While it may never be possible to fully understand children's perspectives (Johansson and White 2011; Sommer et al., 2010), it is possible, through both reflection and refinement, to foster research experiences that honor children and uphold their participatory right of expression for the betterment of our world both today and tomorrow.

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