CHAPTER 15

Understanding and Influencing Research with Children

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Introduction

Research 'with' children is becoming increasingly valued and accepted and there are many research projects where children are directly involved in research processes as researchers in their own right. Yet, even with changing views, children largely remain a silenced and invisible group—their faces typically absent or blurred in research, their voices usually missing from community decisions and forums.

Views about research relationships with children and their status and location in research must continue to be topics of discussion, particularly in relation to ethical considerations and children's visibility in research and broader society. We use this chapter to consider how our researcher values

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and ethical commitments position children, determine their visibility and influence wider cultures of listening to children. We also explore the challenges of attending to and negotiating these.

Initiating a Dialogue

Across the chapter, we seek to pay attention to views and alliances about researching with children, to the values and motivations that inform our research work, and to how we manoeuvre through boundaries and markers that currently control research. Using interlacing storylines and winding threads of meaning-making, we frequently interrupt the main text to discuss our experiences.

Valuing narrative inquiry, we are interested in capturing our thinking, questions and experiences of researching with children (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). We are interested in examining the dissonant qualities and challenging characteristics. And we seek to reflect on recognised and long-standing boundaries and indicators for ethical research, with a view to seeing or suggesting alternatives (Black, 2014; Cumming, Sumsion, & Wong, 2013).

This collection of narratively assembled research encounters relate to research infrastructures, the integrity of research projects and the connecting of researchers to their motivations and ethical commitments. More than capturing the tensions of researching with children, our chapter seeks to open channels for dialogue so that questions and perspectives about research with children continue to circulate.

The challenge of ethics requirements and the hypervigilance of ethics committees approving research are real (Bessant, 2006; Skelton, 2008); the boundaries and territories surrounding researching and working with children numerous and changing (Cumming et al., 2013). Authors engaged in contemporary writing about researching with children have many suggestions for ways forward (Clark, 2011; Waller & Bitou, 2011). But, new dilemmas and concerns are continually emerging, making this kind of research daunting (Spyrou, 2011).

Bessant (2006, p. 54) outlines that anecdotal evidence suggests many researchers are deciding not to research with children *at all* 'because the ethics requirements create too much work'. Those researchers that do continue researching with children are deciding 'to avoid any methods that involve interviewing, surveying or talking with children or young people in any way' (Bessant, 2006, p. 54). Valid representations of children's

views and voices are hardly possible if the most valuable sources of the perspectives of children—children themselves—are not active participants in research.

> Threads of meaning-making: Will it only be the 'confident and experienced researcher' who can make sense of the concerns, respond to their own guiding values and ethical commitments, and negotiate their 'potentially eager hopes to listen to children'? How is the novice researcher affected by the myriad of warnings and discourses that surround researching with children—issues of ethics, consent, relations of power, subjectivities and authenticity?
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> Given this backdrop, perhaps it is not surprising that we find ourselves feeling hesitant, wondering about binaries, dominant theories, sanctioned ways of thinking, new and emerging cautions. How do we situate ourselves as researchers researching with children? There are so many concerns, protocols and recommendations. We too could be easily discouraged from researching with children and from pursuing children's perspectives. Just writing this chapter has engendered a sense of timidity.

When researchers hope to influence, understand and change what is happening in educational and wider worlds, they need to interrogate motivations and meanings (Black, 2014). This may involve attending to uneasy experiences, interrupting everyday ways of thinking or parting with typical ways of thinking and seeing to see 'what else' might matter. This meaning-making space is where we seek to dwell. It is where we invite others to dwell.

Thinking About Children and Research

Historically, children have been a researched group with few rights. Popular constructions of childhood characterise this time as a period of vulnerability and powerlessness. Research relationships with children, their status in research and their representation in the research process are topics of ongoing discussion (Christensen & James, 2008). Research with children is still considered a risky enterprise requiring protective governance and the protective responsibility of researchers (Danby & Farrell, 2004).

Binaries of safe/unsafe or respectful/disrespectful research practices often demarcate sanctioned practices for research of/with children, making 'research with children' an intimidating and formidable space in which to work (McNamara, 2013). Research involving children commonly seeks

to generate knowledge about children and their childhoods (Kellett, 2011) with increasing importance being given to children's accounts and views. Yet, a long-held belief is that disrespectful research methods include 'not hiding the names and identities of people involved in research' (Rhedding-Jones, 2005).

> Threads of meaning-making: In our research work with children we want to listen to and understand their perspectives, to see through their eyes, to see more than our adult lenses allow. Could it be that respectful research actually acknowledges and makes children visible and that ethics is about ensuring proper representation, recognition and power?
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> Asking this question shows how we have been influenced by contemporary sociological understandings of children as competent in life and in research.

Theoretical perspectives of the capable and competent child and movements focused on the rights of the child have influenced shifts in the valuing of children's views and opinions in research (Danby & Farrell, 2004). Yet, before we can celebrate the views of children coming from these perspectives, new concerns are being raised about the 'pro voice climate' and the tendency of researchers to 'overly stress the agency and capability of children' (Spyrou, 2011).

> Threads of meaning-making: It is clear that every research choice communicates a view about children. But the concerns are unsettling. We welcome the move from children 'as subjects of research' to children 'as social actors in research'. But, now researchers are being asked to consider if what is represented is the 'authentic' voice of the child.
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> While heeding the warning to take care, we want to invite children's voices into research. But in our desire to listen we do not want to propagate the idea that children and their voices are out there 'waiting to be captured and documented by us'.
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> What is the danger if we DO fall victim to the fear. What if, instead of choosing to lean toward our values and desired methodologies for researching with children, we decide it is all too hard? We do not want to join those researchers who stop researching with children altogether. We like what Spyrou (2011, p. 162) is suggesting—that we need to 'accept the messiness and ambiguity, the non-factuality and multi-layered nature' of meaning in the stories that we (and children) tell and represent. Listening to children's perspectives expand our understandings.

Researchers are experimenting with ways to listen to and promote children's views. Interested in the standpoints of children, Theobald (2012) uses video-stimulated accounts, a research method that reflects a changing view of children, that is, as experts in accounting for their own lives, and as active participants in research. Yet, Theobald (2012) takes great pains to define what her research is and is not, and does and does not claim to do. In collaborating with children to examine their accounts of a dispute that occurred during a play session, Theobald (2012) positions young children as competent and her research reveals the complexity of children's social worlds, what 'children consider important' in their peer relationships, and how 'they' account for their interactions in front of others (p. 46).

> Threads of meaning-making: In everything we do we are guided by our ethics and values for children and research. We are committed to research ethics, to relationships, and to children's rights—within and beyond research practice. We respect children's competencies and agency, and feel strongly about children making informed decisions.
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> There is no doubt that we have been influenced by philosophical and theoretical perspectives about the rights of the child and the competent child. When writing our ethics proposal for our recent published research (Black, Busch, & Hayes, 2015) linked to our research project, we actively sought to position children as competent in the research. We valued relationships with children and we wanted to be responsive throughout the research process. We brought to the research ideals and ethics about how the process would involve the building of relationships and offer children invitations to share their thinking. Not only did we value their thinking and want to listen closely to their views, but we felt as researchers we had 'a duty to consult them' about their perspectives (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 80). But more than duty, we wanted the research to be flexible, iterative and responsive to children.

Valuing Communal Research Processes

Our experiences with research have shown us that producing knowledge is a cooperative venture. Whilst researchers often seek to control the script and deliver desired project outcomes, it is those with whom we research who provide the most crucial part of the conversation (Black, 2014). To undertake research with others, and with children, is to enter into ethical relationships with them—ethics of justice, and ethics of care and caring (Noddings, 2012).

As researchers, we can without realising it bring with us 'taken-for-granted' attitudes and approaches. Whilst our true intent may well be to listen to children and value their voices, our actions and decisions always warrant further reflection (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011). We can always ask questions like 'how are we positioning knowledge and who holds it?' 'How is our valuing of "relationship" evidenced in our research methods?'

For us, research with children, and research with others, is often an organic, social and intellectual coming together; involving cycles of reflection and meaning-making. While our roles in the projects and our contributions may not look the same, we are co-inquirers involved in storytelling, listening, reflection and representation. When researching with young children we may not know the end point, but we have a willingness to find the way as we go. We seek to listen to children, to be guided by children, by their silences and their inquiry interests (Black et al., 2015).

In our research work, and that of others', opportunities to interact with a range of people interested in children—be it in protecting them, listening to them, understanding them or engaging them—have supported relational knowledge construction and a relational ethics (Black et al., 2015).

> Threads of meaning-making: It is interesting how we are often 'forced' to consider research positions and partiality. Concerns about protecting children informed our university ethics committee's requests for more information about our research project. Exploitation of children is a genuine concern that researchers need to consider very carefully. But, for us, the committee's expectations with regard to 'protecting children' actually challenged our efforts to listen to and share children's contributions.
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> We wanted to explain the research to children and offer them ways of asking questions about the research in order for them to give consent or otherwise. We wanted to listen to their perspectives and silences in responsive and authentic ways. The committee wanted additional information about this process. They were not certain that children would be capable enough to identify whether they wanted to participate or not, or to withdraw consent.
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> In the end, we agreed that 'parent' approval and consent would determine whether data would be included or not. We also decided that if a 'child' communicated they didn't want to participate in particular experiences we would not include any data related to them in any publication. Given we value children's views, we found ourselves asking 'how often in the research process should young children be asked for consent?' and 'how often should we watch for their silences as well as their contributions?'

Ben-Ari and Enosh (2013, p. 425) remind us 'Interactions within the research process are essentially ongoing occurrences of potential misunderstandings. Hence we should perceive research not necessarily as shared and agreed-upon meaning-making endeavours, but rather as ambiguously complex processes with multiple levels of "differences interrupting differences".' So this notion of differences interrupting differences is important to our thinking about communal research processes and interactions, and how we make meaning in research.

> Threads of meaning-making: It is interesting to consider different viewpoints about how knowledge is positioned and who holds it. We have found that our interactions with research infrastructures and mechanisms have highlighted assumptions about expert knowledge and researcher roles that we hadn't even perceived would be areas for misunderstanding. Ethical clearance for our project was not granted initially as the ethics committee wanted to see written approval from our partnering child care centre to participate in the research as well as details of interactions with staff, information about the personnel to be involved and how centre data would be made available to researchers.
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> In particular, the committee wanted specific information about our relationship and interactions with the Director, who we had identified as both educator and co-researcher in our application form. The committee were uncomfortable with the duality of the researcher/participant role. We had not foreseen that this relationship would be considered problematic or an example of uneven power relations. Our intent was to value the Director as a co-researcher with us and we were a little surprised that the committee required clarification. We wondered whether this was linked to research traditions where educators have more typically been the 'subjects' of research.

Critiquing Ethical Motivations and Assumptions

Many of the questions surrounding researching with children ask us to think about relationships and to think about ethics. When we think of 'ethics', we consider responsibility, respect, integrity, morals, values, accountability and regard. Ethics is an important part of any research project that involves people.

Researchers' chosen approaches to research and inquiry are closely linked to their ethical desires as researchers. Researchers conducting

research with children emphasise the ongoing complexity of ethical considerations and highlight that to research with children is to be engaged in 'continual examination and exploration of dilemmas', much more than merely 'adhering to rules of research conduct' (Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor, & Graham, 2012).

Early childhood researchers locate their work within codes of ethics and care and the rights of children (United Nations, 1989). The ethical issue of protecting children from harm is not straightforward when the aims of research are to move from anonymity towards visibility, from vulnerability to capability. Views about protecting children from harm in research can increase barriers to children's participation in research, and stop them from benefiting from the results (Hood et al., 1996).

> Threads of meaning-making: Our ethical commitments provide an anchor for our practice and we use our guiding values to work sensitively and reflexively in changing research circumstances and relationships. At the heart of our research is a desire for research that values and projects the lives of children and their ways of knowing and being in the societies in which they live.
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> We understand that ethical mechanisms are there to ensure ethical standards are met in research and submitting an ethics application to the Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) is an important process. But we experienced a disproportionate emphasis to certain features of the research process which served to block those aspects that sought to be child-centric. The requests from the university ethics committee are reflective of a traditional research paradigm and old views about children in research. Our views were of research as an ongoing social practice and children as active agents in our research.
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> Many issues required clarification. Some of these related to photographing children and retaining samples of their work. Explanation was required with regard to our focus on collecting data in identifiable formats. Why did we want this data? (Images of children, their comments, their art work). How would we use it? How would it be analysed?
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> Connecting to our researcher motivations, we wanted data to be identifiable because we wanted visibility for children. We wanted their ways of knowing and their contributions to be seen and acknowledged. The ethics committee were not familiar with such motivations. Typically, researcher requests for data to be identifiable are made in instances where

a group of participants 'are to be compared with another' or 'to support the aggregation of data'.

It is clear that the benefits and costs of research practices have to be explored beyond rules and binaries. Additionally, researchers have to become better at communicating their ethical commitments and motivations (to children and to others) and at challenging the othering of children in research (Powell et al., 2012). It is also clear that ethical codes and practices need to be iterative and responsive to those being researched and to research processes and contexts. We may not always know in advance what will happen or how it will be managed and so our ethical practice needs to be negotiated and situated (Ebrahim, 2010).

Threads of meaning-making: We were required to confirm our compliance in terms of ensuring all raw data would be de-identified and not made public. Assurance was required that no child would be named or recognisable in the dissemination of research results.

The ethics committee wanted children's faces blurred as a matter of course, not just if parents or children requested it. They wanted to remove the visibility of children from storying, data collection and reporting.

We experienced real tension. We wanted children's contributions to be made visible and public, and their role as thinkers and community members recognised. What is lost when children do not appear alongside their meaning-making attempts? (Fig. 15.1).

Fig. 15.1 We can photograph how children have used materials, but if children are missing from the images we take, can we see what matters to them? Can we see and understand the meaning they are making? What is visible/invisible?

We need to become better at communicating our ethical commitments. Ethics committees often have a strong protectionist discourse and this can serve to gate-keep children out of research processes, and particularly out of research reporting (Skelton, 2008). We found there were limited avenues to talk with the committee about research perspectives. Time was of the essence and we needed ethics approval to go forward. So, we agreed we would blur children's faces for publication in book chapters and journal articles so that the research project could 'commence'. So for us, having opportunities for dialogue with ethics committees is a potential place for change.

> Threads of meaning-making: What is the impact of our willingness to comply? How can new ways of thinking occur if researchers give up on their motivations? How can children and their ways of knowing be made visible in these 'protective' spaces? What is in the 'best interests' of children? Does our taken-for-granted view that documentation of children's stories and meaning-making (and making photographs of children public) is a 'valuable early childhood practice' fully appreciate the ethical dilemmas that might surround this practice? What else might we need to consider in relation to our own agendas and ways of seeing?

The process of 'getting research projects approved' often feels like a top-down driven guessing game, filled with hoop jumping and obstacles to negotiate and little room for conversation and debate. Fostering dialogue about 'ethical research with children' is important so that mechanisms are responsive to the nature of researching with children and to new developments and understandings about methodologies and ethics. We need to work together to create support structures for critical colleagueship and dialogue (Pasque, Carducci, Gildersleeve, & Kuntz, 2011).

> Threads of meaning-making: We also think about the impact that our efforts to research with children have had and are having on us, on our identities as 'researchers researching with children'. Across a range of projects we have repeatedly found that ethics committees and their decisions are contextualised within a discourse of children's vulnerability. Invariably the committee sees its role as protecting and defending vulnerable children, viewing us and our research as risk factors and potential threats. It has been incredibly disheartening and disempowering for us as researchers and educators who follow codes of conduct, live by codes of ethics, and value children, to have our ideas and approaches questioned and rejected multiple times by these ethic mechanisms.

Technology is also bringing developments in methodologies and further increases the need to foster dialogue regarding ethics. Public images of children and families abound within the contemporary world. They appear in the media, on the internet, in advertising, on YouTube clips and in photos uploaded by families to social networking sites. Such images are publically available, potentially providing rich data that may be accessed by researchers.

Threads of meaning-making: It is interesting to think about the contemporary world and the differences in approaches to sharing knowledge and experiences about children. Alongside our research project, the child care centre we were working with engaged with community groups (such as local industry and the art gallery) in a pedagogical project that explored children's understandings of their local community including local industry. The centre engaged a local artist in an extended 'artist-in-residence' program as part of this project. To broaden children's understandings about industry, children toured an industry site and staff from industry visited the centre. The industry group, so impressed with the learning and knowledge being generated by children, documented these visits and included children's stories, conversations and images in their regular employee newsletter. (See Fig. 15.2)

The artist in residence planned an exhibition of sculptural pieces and the creation of an interactive arts-based installation for children as part of an exhibition at the local gallery. The aim of the installation was to engage children from the wider community with the exhibition and with opportunities to make meaning about local industries and environments. Photos and stories about the projects and art-making that children at the child care centre had engaged with featured prominently in the gallery's exhibition brochure and booklet, as well as throughout the gallery's interactive installation space (see Figs. 15.3–15.5). The pedagogical project at the child care centre had influenced and informed the gallery installation. The images around the walls of the gallery documented how children at the child care centre had used and played with materials and ideas. These images in turn influenced how children attending the exhibition interacted with the display materials and activities.

In contrast with these public displays of children and their learning, the ethics mechanisms in place for us as researchers meant that children had to be completely 'de-identified' in anything we produced or made public. Engaging with the various visual sources below it can be seen that these were valuable opportunities to expand community awareness of children and their thinking and learning. There are many benefits for children as others begin to see children's capabilities and knowledge, and recognise the importance of their voice in society.

QAL Aluminews

Childs Play

In issue seven of Aluminews we mentioned local artist Margaret Worthington has been working with QAL as part of her Master of Contemporary Art project, 'Industry sited within the Environment'.

Other than the work for her Masters, including the sculptures featured in issue seven, Margaret has been working alongside Coordinators from Rainbow Valley Kindergarten; Paul and Marion. They have been developing a unique educational program with the kindy kids teaching them about the industrial giant that they see every day.

They have been talking about aerial photographs of QAL and relating them to road maps, they have also talked about machinery and bright safety clothing QAL workers wear. QAL have donated some of the safety gear; shirts, hard hats, ear muffs and mono-goggles to the Kindergarten for the children to play dress-ups.

Recently some of the students from Rainbow Valley came to QAL on an excursion. The children each remembered snippets of their journey so they compiled their memories and have recreated sections of QAL back at the Kindergarten. Complete with Raw Materials and the big bauxite stockpile.

Paul said the children are really enjoying the experience and love playing in the 'mock up' sections of QAL.

"Now that the children have seen QAL we should be able to represent it with more detail. It seems lots of children took different snippets from the trip. The areas at the fore front of the children's mind when they came back from the tour were; the ships, water, pipes, mud and the big mounds of "red dirt" (bauxite)," Paul said.

"The total concept of bauxite to alumina then into aluminium might still be beyond a lot of the children, but at least an awareness has been generated."

This is what some of the children had to say about their tour of QAL when they got back to the kindergarten;

"We went on the bus and we stayed on the seats while the bus drove around QAL. Crystal from QAL was our guide and she showed us around and told us what is done in each section."

"What are chemicals?" (Mason), when Crystal mentioned the caustic soda chemical.

"I could see the island where my Mum worked on." (Kelsey)

"I liked the pipes because steam goes through it and I saw steam coming out of it." (Olivia)

When Benny saw all the steam at ground level he said, "it was like the sand pit at Rainbow Valley."

"I saw water and the mud that was coming out of the big pipes." (Riley) in reference to the red mud.

The green shower lights were a big hit. Crystal said they are green because it's the last colour you see before you go blind. There was green lights everywhere and we wore our name tags on the bus." (Montanna)

"The pipe was like the hot water inside the darkness." (Abbie)

"I saw a rocket like fire." (Ryder)

"I really like this world." (Ben)

"I liked the tanks because they were so hot and there was dirt and bauxite." (Sam)

"I saw three chimney pots and smoke (steam) was coming out of it." (Hamish)

"The spinning wheels were great." (Cohen)

"I know where QAL is." (Ella)

Kelsey takes Crystal on a guided tour of the Kindergarten and shows off their version of the Raw Materials bauxite stockpile.

Sam, Hunter and Kelsey enjoy dressing-up in the QAL safety gear.

Hunter talks through their own version of an aerial look at QAL.

Fig. 15.2 This Queensland Alumina Limited (QAL) industry staff newsletter includes photos of children and transcripts of their conversations. Staff and others can see what children know and understand. Ethic mechanisms prohibited us from producing identifiable material

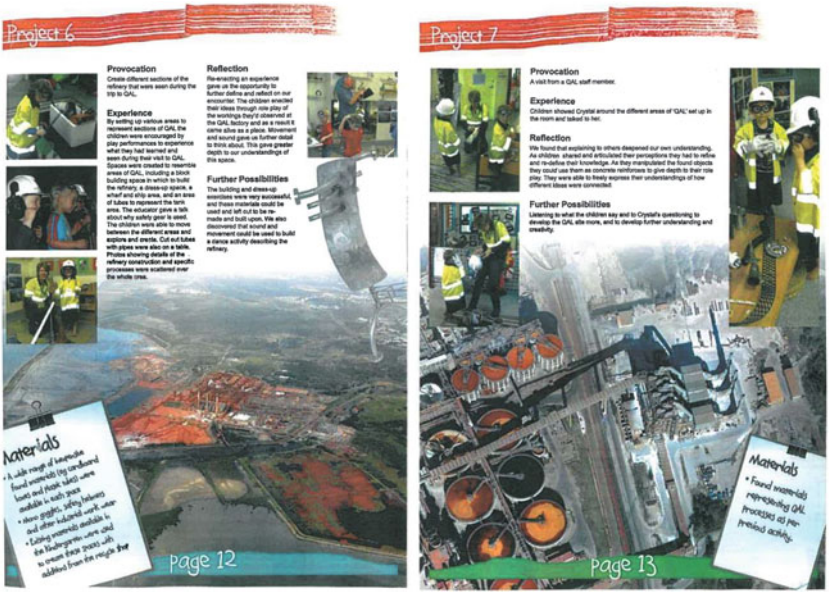

Fig. 15.3 The Art Gallery brochure that accompanies the exhibition has images of children, their play and creations. Ethic mechanisms prohibited us from producing identifiable material

Creating Spaces for Ongoing Dialogue

With this chapter, we have sought to create a range of spaces to ask questions and to ponder the challenges and fruitfulness of researching with children. We think there needs to be more of these safe spaces; spaces where reflection is encouraged and valued as a resource that researchers can use to consider their motivations and methodologies for researching with children.

A viable educational research community in the future will need to look within and it will need to look beyond. It will need to consider the contemporary world and the twenty-first-century child. It will need to consider its diverse purposes and possibly rethink what constitutes the boundaries of educational research, of research with children.

Threads of meaning-making: We have encountered a range of dilemmas connected to research infrastructures and the integrity of research projects. We

Fig. 15.4 This child attended the art gallery exhibition and children's installation. She was photographed by the artist who wanted to show how children were responding to her work and exploring materials and ideas. Ethic mechanisms prohibited us from producing identifiable material

have experienced first-hand that research mechanisms can potentially remove us from our critical stance and the core values behind our research. We have found that responses from internal and external stakeholders in research highlight big differences in terms of how children and ethics are viewed.

Many questions emerge for us around researching with children: Are we listening to children? Are children central? Where are our blind spots? What assumptions do we bring? Self-awareness on the part of the researcher is critical. And so is awareness of diverse and alternative views and practices in relation to visibility, consent, and ethical commitments. How might we advocate for, rather than reduce, what we see as the 'integrity' of our research? What might 'equal partnerships' in research look like when children are involved? How might we create support structures for critical colleagueship and dialogue for all the stakeholders in research? Can we move beyond questions of who has the most and least power? How might we manage the range of research dilemmas and concerns to produce meaning,

Fig. 15.5 Is there reduced understanding if children are not visible? What happens when children are removed or anonymised? Ethic mechanisms prohibited us from producing identifiable material

> reciprocity and understanding? How are responsive, reflexive relationships created in research? How might we support each other to process and work through the many warnings, perspectives and discourses so that we do not decide to 'not research with children at all'?

Research, and meaning-making, is not a simple and precise process; rather, it involves 'ongoing occurrences of potential misunderstandings' and 'ambiguously complex processes' (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2013). Embracing internal and relational entanglements and the disruption of everyday ways of thinking about things is therefore important; it is here we learn and imagine possibilities (Giugni, 2011). Mutually disquieting conversations that 'stir things up' between researchers/researched/other stakeholders are crucial for responsive and improved education research that makes a difference. Disquiet, dissonance and difference can stimulate fresh ways of seeing and thinking and interrupt old patterns, perceptions and assumptions.

Guidance also comes as we look within to core values and ethics of care. These opportunities for reflection, self-awareness and knowledge generation are best served not in isolation but in relationship and ongoing

dialogue with others (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2013; Lawrence, 2005). We need to work together to create critical colleagueship. The generation of fresh knowledge is possible when we experiment together, when we question and unsettle each other's rhetoric and when we reflect deeply. With these commitments, we can consider and circulate new ways of understanding and influencing research with children.

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