

CHILD RESEARCH TOWARDS 2015 – A GLOBAL SCENARIO

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Introduction.

In this short presentation I have chosen to ground myself in the last ten years as a basis for talking about the next ten years. I will sketch in what I see as major developments during the last decade, focusing predominantly on research which is directed at influencing policy. Then I will identify what I see as a specific focus for change in the next decade with a particular highlight on some prescriptive directions (*indicated by italics* in my transparencies). Finally I will draw out what I see as some major tensions confronting child researchers over the next decade. My understanding of the area is limited to written material and forums in the English language.

When I think what the next 10 years may mean for child research, I look back on the last ten years and consider there has been a dramatic change. There has been an exponential increase in the amount of research being conducted on and around children, child welfare issues and also in moving to research *with* children. I believe this exponential increase will continue for the next ten years, with the challenge for us as child researchers. being how to make this research significant in contributing to improving children's lives. Ultimately it is the way research intersects with policymaking that will enable this improvement in children's lives to occur.

For today's discussion I am describing the contributions researchers make to policy according to a conventional hierarchical conceptualization of knowledge as coming from 'top down', as developed collaboratively, or as coming from the 'bottom up'. Most of the research which is published tends to be part of a top down model based on what is referred to as 'objective research and expert opinion' (Finch, 1986, p.24.). This is research in which the aims and methods are adult designed. By referring to research contributed collaboratively, I am meaning that where adult experts and children share power in developing and conducting research. When I refer to bottom up research, it is to child initiated knowledge development.

I have identified 4 main themes/issues which go through current research:

1. The collection of data for policy making
2. Adding meaning to data
3. Engaging theoretically with childhood
4. Children as researchers

Child research	In the last ten years	In the next ten years
Overall trend	An exponential increase globally in the amount of research being conducted on and around children and child welfare and also with children.	An increase in research will continue with the challenge how to make this research significant in contributing to improving children's lives through the way research intersects with policymaking.
Top down research constructed as 'objective research and expert opinion' expert adults	Data for policy	
	Major shift to acknowledging children's conceptual autonomy and counting them in (since European Childhood Project*).	This shift will be accelerated and <i>applied more broadly, eg every time we think families for research, think children as individuals</i>
	Commencement of aggregation of known data on children nationally and cross nationally, in particular in many OECD countries. Some measuring and tracking of data about children through longitudinal studies and program evaluations, particularly in relation to visible children eg child welfare.	More solid data bases, increased longitudinal studies, aggregated and comparative program evaluation data sets. <i>Contextualisation of results so that children's individual lives are rendered visible.</i>
	Research largely guided by national and international agendas about 'good' societies. Continued emphasis on children as 'the future' as investment and as social capital - influencing focus on data about outcomes as deficits.	Increase in attempts to monitor childhood towards the good society. Questioning of legitimacy of adult perspectives on children. <i>Children and all cultures should have a part in formulating good society, including positives for children of well being and aspirations.</i>
Increasing emphasis on research for practice, rigor in research and evidence based research, particularly in child protection and child welfare research	Increase will continue. <i>Needs to be an explication of values and assumptions around concepts such as 'rigor' and 'evidence' and analysis of the way power constructs statistics.</i>	

	Adding meaning to data	
	Recognised importance of going beyond descriptive approach as provided by statistics (in say researching poverty) to seek meaning for individual children through qualitative data	Quantitative and qualitative techniques are likely to be more frequently used in a complementary way.
	There is increasing data on poverty and its impact on children's lives but there is limited research on ways to relieve poverty for children.	<i>National and cross national research is needed into the relationship between child poverty and social welfare and other programs.</i>
Collaborative research	Engaging theoretically with childhood	
	A change in focus for much research away from children's futures, to their presents, children as 'beings' not just 'becomings' (Childhood project). Children are increasingly seen as actors or participants, partners in research. Their subjectivities are regarded as legitimate	Increased research on children's lives <i>but also the placing of these lives in family and community contexts</i>
	Researchers have identified the way in which children's vulnerability extends beyond biological factors and is embedded in power relations, essentially generational, but also gender, class and race based.	Researchers acting globally <i>through organizations such as CWI will be in a position to make the effects of adult oppression of children through structural inequalities, within and across nations, more visible and thereby confronting to policymakers.</i>
	Research in presenting children's lived experiences has begun to challenge the emphasis of mainstream research which problematises and seeks to reform the behaviour of children, where this threatens adult values and interests.	<i>Child researchers aware of structural factors will continue to make visible the lives of children affected by war, disease and famine in order to challenge the national and international policies place survival and quality of children's lives in jeopardy to poverty, violence and disease.</i>

	<p>Social action techniques such as PRA used by NGOs in majority world countries have the potential to address the political nature of knowledge production.</p>	<p>Globally, social action research will be increasingly used to link the presentation of children's knowledge with organisational power structures</p>
	<p>Collaborative research between adults and children is part of a renegotiation of current adult-child relations. In challenging the dichotomisation of adult and child and existing power relations researchers are questioning their role in representation of children and dissemination of research findings</p>	<p>As researchers continue to question the appropriateness of assuming an expert role in interpreting and/or disseminating findings obtained in partnership research, adult researchers will be challenged <i>to be child advocates as well as to empower children to be their own advocates.</i></p>
	<p>Researching children's lives challenges the categorization of children and their problems and contributes to more holistic approaches, including looking at positives and aspirations as well as deficits and problems.</p>	<p>Concepts such as 'at risk' are likely to be contested and rethought from the standpoint(s) of children, and from the standpoint(s) of children globally.</p>
Children Researching		
<p>Research from the bottom up.</p>	<p>Children are initiating and conducting research, seeking adult assistance where they require resources controlled by adults. For example, children initiate and conduct their own research as part of community action in majority world countries and in minority world countries in chat rooms through the use of internet technology.</p>	<p>There are likely to be increased attempts to monitor children's research and maintain its subordination to adult direction. <i>Researchers should advocate for respect for children's standpoint's</i></p>
	<p>Children contribute as expert commentators on their social worlds.</p>	<p>For children to be effective researchers, they will require resources. <i>It may be appropriate for organisations such as CWI to think through its role in this area.</i></p>

EXISTING TENSIONS WHICH ARE LIKELY TO INTENSIFY DURING THE NEXT 10 YEARS.

1. A tension exists between movements to impose globally, Eurocentric research methods and normative concepts (eg family and child development) in benchmarking child well being, and approaches based on dialogue and exchange across disciplinary, institutional, cultural and geographic boundaries. CWI has played an important role here in supporting cross national research and the development of alternative conceptual frameworks. *The documentation of this process and reflections on it as it is further implemented over the next 10 years, would of itself be valuable data.*

2. As increasing numbers of researchers seek to involve children as participants and children seek to do their own research, there is likely to be an acceleration of the tensions referred to by Prout, as inextricably linked in late modernity - those between control and self-realisation. These tensions are already surfacing around issues of children's informed consent to their participation in research. Similarly, as children seek to do their own research, in for example chat rooms on the net, or as community activists, gatekeepers are asserting their responsibilities to protect and monitor children's activities and decide their legitimacy. *CWI can provide a forum for promoting advocacy for children and for a renegotiation of child adult relations through research.*

3. Academic researchers will be placed within an increasingly ambiguous context around furthering their own promotional and professional roles and promoting the rights of children to be empowered in the research process. For example, when do expert adults move over on forum platforms on children's issues and facilitate the involvement of children in such forums, as partners. This ambiguity will be resolved by critical reflexivity amongst researchers. Such reflexivity will cause us to question why is it that in 2005 it is unlikely that it would be acceptable for 3 men to talk about researching women, but it is still acceptable for 3 adults to talk about child research. *Hopefully, by 2015 we will have found a way for children to effectively present their views to such forums, as these of CWI.*

In summary, my hopes in relation to a scenario for child research towards 2015, are that:

- Adult researchers will increasingly use their expertise to facilitate recognition of children as people, who may be different from, but not lesser than adults, with the consequence that children's knowledge will be respected and inform policies.
- Adult researchers will increasingly confront themselves with the classic question first asked by the sociologist Becker, 'whose side are we on' when they carry out research, acknowledging the potential they have as advocates for all children in promoting through research, more symmetry in adult child relations and more equity for all children within and across nations.

Note

* *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon – Implications for Future Social Policies* (Childhood Project) conducted 1987 – 1992, was an international research project, under the auspices of the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research. A significant product of this project is the book *Childhood Matters. Social Theory, Practice and Politics* (1994), by Qvortrup, J, Bardy, M, Sgritta, G and Wintersberger, H. (eds). Avebury, Vienna.

References

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Prout, A. (2000) Children's participation: Control and self-realisation in British late modernity. *Children & Society, 14*, pp. 304-315.