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Multiple methods in qualitative research with children: more insight or just more?

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ABSTRACT This article explores the research implications of using multi-methods within a broad qualitative approach by drawing on the experience of conducting two childhood obesity-focused qualitative studies of Australian children's perceptions and experiences of place, space and physical activity. Children described and depicted their physical activities and experiences: in focus group interviews, by mapping their local, social and recreational spaces and by photographing their meaningful places, spaces and activities using a Photovoice approach. The authors describe, reflect on and critique their chosen research approach, discussing the value, utility and pitfalls associated with using multiple methods with children. The article concludes that using multiple methods in researching children's experiences is a valuable approach that does not merely duplicate data but also offers complementary insights and understandings that may be difficult to access through reliance on a single method of data collection.

KEYWORDS: *children, focus group, mapping, multi-method, obesity, participatory, Photovoice, physical activity, qualitative*

Background to the study

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, OBESITY AND CHILDREN

Physical inactivity is a growing international public health concern and an important risk factor for all morbidity and mortality (Sallis et al., 1997; Sallis and Owen, 1999). In Australia children are becoming less fit (Dolman et al., 1999), a trend noted in children's activity research internationally (Saakslähti et al., 2004; Suadicani and Gyntelberg, 2004; Wedderkopp et al.,

2004). Being physically active is important for children's overall physical, emotional and social health, and wellbeing – a positive benefit that extends into adult life (Saakslahti et al., 2004; Suadicani and Gyntelberg, 2004; Wedderkopp et al., 2004). A recent Australian obesity summit report warned that, 'From 1985–1995 the level of combined overweight/obesity in Australian children more than doubled' (http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/adult/summit/bgpaper_final.pdf [consulted 18 December 2003]).

In addition to biomedical and epidemiological data, recent studies from children's social and cultural geography reveal the widespread and complex ways that children's worlds of play and physical activity and their use of public spaces have been constricted and controlled (Blades et al., 1998; Furedi, 2002; Matthews et al., 1999), becoming what David Buckingham describes as 'privatized and subject to adult supervision' (Buckingham, 2000: 70). We were therefore keen to offer children the opportunity to portray their 'activity environments' visually through mapping and photography.

While the importance of physical activity for children is widely recognized, the research literature on childhood obesity and physical activity reveals a dearth of research where children themselves have been asked to give their perspectives and understandings of physical activity. There are few studies where children have expressed the meanings that physical activity holds for them, or where they have been able to contextualize such understandings within their everyday physical and social worlds. Our study attempted to redress this gap in research understanding.

PLAN OF THE ARTICLE

This article presents a discussion of the methodological approach taken in a recent qualitative study with multiple aims and funding sources that investigated children's experiences and perceptions of physical activity and places and spaces in their lives in relation to the broader topic of childhood obesity. We begin by outlining the philosophical and conceptual understandings that informed our approach and discuss how these translated into specific methodological strategies and approaches. We then discuss the advantages and possible pitfalls inherent in using a variety of qualitative and interpretive approaches to enabling children to consider and articulate understandings of their experiential and perceptual worlds in relation to physical activity. We also take up the calls for a greater willingness to report the often messy and unpredictable nature of qualitative research (Riches and Dawson, 1996), and especially where this research involves children (Barker and Weller, 2003), by critiquing our own use of qualitative multi-methods, highlighting what did and did not work well and questioning whether such an approach generated new information and insights regarding children's physical activity or simply more data.

'The missing child'

Children's health and social care research is an international multi-million-dollar enterprise. Throughout the world, doctors, nurses, educators, psychologists, social scientists and others strive to develop new research-based understandings to improve the lives of children, young people and their families. Within this concerted effort, however, lies the paradox of the 'missing child'. The predominant approach to researching children's experiences is grounded in 'research on' rather than 'research with' or 'research for' children (Darbyshire, 2000; Oakley, 1994), ignoring the views of children as active agents and 'key informants' in matters pertaining to their health and wellbeing.

Qualitative approaches to understanding children's worlds

Researchers undertaking qualitative research with children immediately confront cultural, social, psychological and political perspectives that militate against taking children seriously. For example, children are seen as 'part of' a larger unit, subsumed under families, schools and households. Thus, institutions and professions often have an entrenched tradition of doing things 'to' children (de Winter et al., 1999; Kalnins et al., 1992; Runeson et al., 2001; Sandbaek, 1999) while focusing almost exclusively on the responsibilities of adults. Children may also be seen as unsophisticated or 'silly' and thus incapable of being taken seriously in discussions about their needs (Oakley, 1994). The powerful but increasingly contested tenets of developmentalism (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1993) maintain that children lack the capacity for abstract thinking that characterizes the 'maturity' of later adolescence and adulthood and thus would fail to meet the criteria of 'good research respondents' (Scott, 2000: 101). Adults may believe that standard research methods such as interviewing may be 'beyond' children and thus the most appropriate way to find out what children think, want or need is to seek 'proxy information' from significant adults such as parents and professionals (Scott, 2000: 99). This is particularly true of children under eight years of age (Dockett and Perry, 2003). Children may be thought of as mini or 'incomplete adults' (Scott, 2000: 98) and, under this assumption, programs for adults are easily 'adapted' for children by changing language and images, but not the underlying principles. Adults may believe that they 'know what childhood is all about' as they were children once themselves, regardless of how long ago this was – what Mouritsen (2002: 35) calls 'the childhood baggage of adults'. Children also have no political 'clout'. They most certainly 'consume' but do not vote, lobby, organize or campaign and thus have what Mayall (2002: 154) calls 'non-citizen status'. The 'exclusion of the voices of children from the political culture of the public sphere' is therefore commonplace (Kulynych, 2001: 259).

There is a growing awareness that, while quantitative, survey and experimental studies are vital, they cannot by themselves provide all of the information and insight required to appreciate children's experiences or to help plan and provide appropriately responsive child and youth health services. This appreciation of the need for a 'broad church' of research approaches to children's health and wellbeing informed our study and was spurred by several significant theoretical and methodological developments such as children's rights, children's participation and involvement and the 'new sociology of childhood'. The Children's Rights agenda has shaped child research by fostering a realization that children and young people have a right to be consulted, heard and to appropriately influence the services and facilities that are provided for them (Lansdown, 1994; Woodhouse, 2004). The 'participation and involvement' agenda challenges researchers to consider ways of actively and meaningfully involving children in all aspects of the research process (Barter and Renold, 2000; Curtis et al., 2004; Devine, 2002; Lightfoot and Sloper, 2002; Mulvihill et al., 2000; Shemmings, 2000; Sloper and Lightfoot, 2003). The research produced under the aegis of the UK Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) 'Children 5–16 Programme' has had a profound influence on research and scholarship related to children, and has created an international awareness of the 'new sociology of childhood' as a major conceptual shift in how we understand the nature of childhood and children's worlds.

ELICITING CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCES OF PLACE, SPACE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The aim of the current studies was to encourage and enable children aged between 4 and 12 years to articulate their perspectives on physical activity, its related barriers and enablers, and the places and spaces in their environment that were important in their everyday activities. Specifically we sought to:

- determine words and images that children associate with physical activity, exercise, sport, fitness and play;
- understand children's choices about physical activity and play;
- identify children's activity preferences and choice-making processes; and
- consider whether children are able to be as active as they wish and identify any barriers and enablers that may exist for them.

Using multiple methods

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN

Focus groups are used increasingly in research with children (Davis, 2001; Doswell and Vandestienne, 1996; Hoppe et al., 1995; Hurley, 1998; Morgan et al., 2002; O'Dea, 2003; Vaughn et al., 1996) as children are generally comfortable and familiar with the process of discussing matters in groups.

Focus groups in schools were therefore a congruent and appropriate research approach to gauge children's views (Horowitz et al., 2003). The main purpose of the focus groups was to enable and allow the children to discuss and articulate 'in their own words' their perceptions, understandings and experiences in relation to play, exercise, sport and physical activity. Seventeen focus groups were held involving 90 boys and 114 girls aged between 4–12 years in six government/public schools in both urban and rural areas of South Australia that served generally low socio-economic areas. In planning the focus groups we used our experience in both research methods and in working with children and young people to consider the effects of group dynamics, peer pressure, gender dynamics and development stages within the groups. We incorporated and modified good focus group research practice with children (Hill et al., 1996; Morgan et al., 2002; Vaughn et al., 1996) and applied this to sampling issues, (MacDougall, 2001), group dynamics, planning and interpretation (Putland et al., 1997).

Ongoing discussions in the research literature question whether focus groups are treated simplistically as group conversations, whether they are used in philosophically incongruent ways and whether the interactive 'group' aspect is overlooked analytically (Carey, 1994; Carey and Smith, 1994; Green and Hart, 1999; Hyden and Bulow, 2003; Kitzinger, 1994; Webb and Kevern, 2001; Wilkinson, 1998). In this study we adopted several strategies to address these concerns. We wanted the focus groups to generate interactive conversation with and between children rather than being merely individual interviews within a group of people. By definition a focus group must have a focus. It is not a haphazard data fishing trip and thus the participating schools, parents and children were all given 'child-friendly' information sheets and clear explanations of what we wanted to talk with the children about. Conducting focus groups with participating children in an art or activities area adjacent to their classroom seemed to indicate to the children that this was not 'school work' and helped create an informal environment with animated, interactive discussion and contributions. The moderators were flexible enough to 'go with the flow' of the groups, to appreciate the dynamics of working with groups of children and to understand the areas that the children were moving the discussions into. It was therefore vital that each moderator had extensive experience in children's group interactions, thus enabling the regular classroom teacher to remain with the class while focus groups were being conducted in a different location.

The researchers incorporated activities into the groups to provide both variety and interest for the children and to stimulate their thinking and discussion about the focus on physical activity and its associated people, places and spaces. Two particularly productive approaches were the 'show me' and 'interested idiot' strategies. We asked the children to 'show me' physically and directly in relation to play, activity and places. In one session this developed into what may be modestly claimed as a methodological 'first'

– the ‘jumping focus group’. The facilitator noted that the children were following norms for communicating with visitors by being polite and answering questions rather than engaging in discussion. Therefore, the facilitator changed the environment by asking everyone if they would like to jump and talk, signalling a more fun and interactive norm of communication. The children subsequently expressed the physicality of fun by demonstrating one variety (of many) of the game of ‘chasey’.

The facilitators also found it useful to adopt an ‘interested idiot’ stance of the adult who had forgotten what play and activity was like as a child and who really needed the children to help them understand what it is like now. A final approach which markedly engaged the participating children was our promise that what they told us and what we learned from the study would be ‘fed back’ both to them and, more importantly from their perspective, that it would be passed on to adults who can make a difference, such as parents, schools and government services. The children were adamant that we should ‘talk about this research on the news’ and that adults should ‘come and talk to us more’ as ‘we have to live in the future’ (MacDougall et al., 2004).

MAPPING

To make the focus groups more interactive and interesting for the children and to allow them to express their own perceptions of play and activity spaces visually, we invited them to draw and discuss a map of the social and physical environments where they were most likely to participate in physical activity. Studies have shown that children as young as four years from various cultures have ‘mapping abilities’ including the perceptual and scale interpretation abilities to read and understand simple maps (Blades et al., 1998; Blaut et al., 2003). Such mapping exercises have proved valuable in other studies of children’s perceptions of their environment (Morrow, 2001, 2003). Mapping also encouraged free responses and individual interpretations related to the focus group topics. Mapping enabled children to portray graphically play, activity, places and spaces in their lives, to visually site themselves within their families and social environment and perhaps expand on their verbal accounts. In some groups we offered the children the opportunity to draw images or write slogans that they felt would encourage children’s physical activity. At each focus group a non-participating observer kept detailed contextual and observational notes which were subsequently transcribed, discussed, confirmed and distributed among the research team. Facilitators also annotated the maps with any relevant explanations provided by the children.

PHOTOVOICE

The third method used was Photovoice (Booth and Booth, 2003; Killion and Wang, 2000; McIntyre, 2003; Wang and Burris, 1997; Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001) which was incorporated into the study to generate different and

complementary visual information. We anticipated that children who may perhaps have been reluctant to contribute in a focus group would feel more autonomous and in control if asked to take their own photographs. We asked children from the focus groups to help us further by taking photos with a disposable camera that we provided. Children were chosen largely on the basis of their differing physical activity levels and on the content of their maps. We asked children to take photographs over the following week, with adult help if necessary, and to write a brief comment or caption for each photo saying why they took it and what they wished the photograph to say in relation to physical activities. As a visual data production strategy it had the potential to enable children to depict people and places that were important to them within their home, school and wider community. Photography offers a direct (but of course also interpreted and selective) way of seeing the world and provided a valuable, visual complement to the focus group interviews with children. Experience with Photovoice involving both children and adults suggests that visual methods can generate different ideas from those derived from verbal or written interviews. Maps and photographs have been used in research related to children and the environment (Aitken and Wingate, 1993; Dodman, 2003; Morrow, 2001; Percy, 1995; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Young and Barrett, 2001), but there has been scant use of this technique in health research with children (Hanna et al., 1995).

The theoretical basis for our decision to ask the children to draw maps of and photograph their environments was not that we believed that children were unable to articulate their experiences and were thus capable only of visual expression – what Backett-Milburn and McKie have critiqued as the ‘quick fix’ approach to researching children that limits their potential to ‘draw and write’ (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999: 396). Rather, we believed that, if a respectful and sensitive inquiry approach was taken, children could and would describe and discuss their perceptions, experiences and understandings related to the central questions of physical activity, places and spaces in their lives.

Discussion

THE VALUE OF USING MULTI-METHODS

There are obvious attractions in using multiple methods when attempting to understand children’s worlds. It seems almost intuitively appealing to imagine that a range of methodological strategies would capture a broader and deeper range of children’s perceptions and experiences than a reliance on a single technique. As Morgan et al. (2002: 18) note in relation to focus groups, ‘they can only provide a partial account and may require to be supplemented by other data’. The question remains, however, as to whether these varied approaches to enabling children to describe their worlds create clearer insights and understandings or are they merely more grist to the



FIGURE 1. *Backyard trampolines*

methodological mill. Methodologically, is more better, or is it simply more? Our experience in this study suggests that helping children to express themselves in a variety of complementary and congruent ways is valuable but not without pitfalls.

The study's consultative and participatory approach gleaned valuable information from children. Our use of multiple methods increased children's opportunity to choose and have at least partial control about how to contribute and what to say, and helped engage and interest them while demonstrating that we recognized them as active agents in the creation of their worlds. It is unlikely that a single method would have revealed some of the most important study findings such as the stark differences between their conceptions of play and sport, their understandings of the place of television in their lives and their enthusiastic desire for involvement in decisions that affect their lives here and now (MacDougall et al., 2004).

Focus groups, mapping and Photovoice provided different yet complementary information about the children's activities – for example, backyard trampolines were often featured in children's photographs but never in mapping or interviews. The role of pets in children's activities was not mentioned in focus groups and could easily have been overlooked. Activities involving pets and especially dogs were, however, a marked feature of the children's maps and their photographs. This supports Rasmussen and Smidt's (2003: 96) finding that 'Animals can be the reason for children to be moving around in the neighbourhood'. The children's photographs also depicted the emotional and exuberant aspects of play that their interview accounts could not.



FIGURE 2. Photographs of dogs



FIGURE 3. Composite mappings of dogs

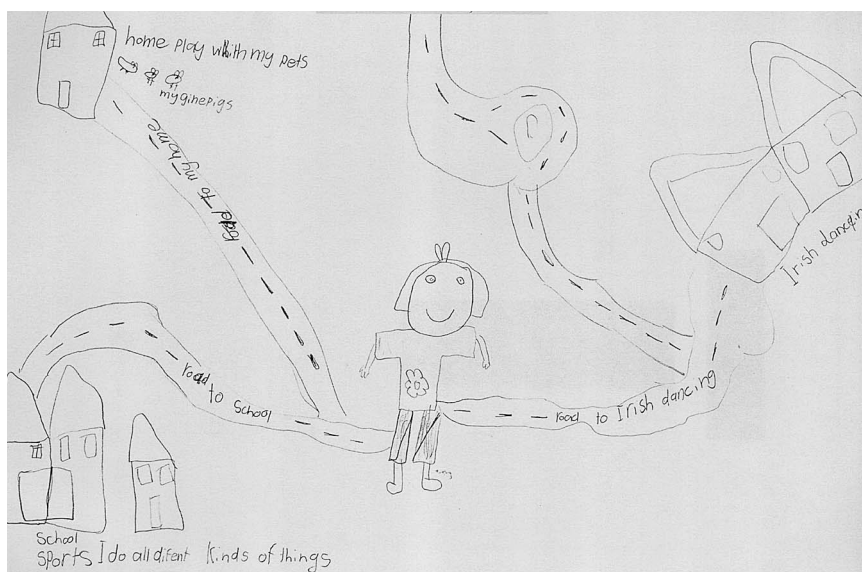


FIGURE 4. Rural child's map of activities

It is possible that the children's photographs of backyard play equipment such as trampolines, swings and basketball hoops illustrate the general societal shift from the public to the private sphere that has markedly impacted on childhood, a phenomenon highlighted in recent studies of children's geography (Aitken, 2001; Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Jutras, 2003; Matthews et al., 1998; Phillips, 2001; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Valentine and McKendrick have reported that around 40 percent of parents classify their child's outdoor play as being in the garden or backyard as opposed to being in a public space (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997: 226–7). Whether such a shrinking of children's opportunities for experiencing and enjoying activity in the public realm is 'enrichment' or 'entrapment' is a contentious point. As O'Brien et al. (2000) note:

The general elaboration of the modern urban home, with its playspaces, global communication networks, pets, toys and music systems has created a socio-sphere of enrichment rather than entrapment for many contemporary children, particularly children from materially advantaged background. (p. 271)

The children's maps uniquely conveyed the diverse, contextual and spatial sense of their play and physical activity environments. For example, rural children's maps often showed the sites of play and physical activity as being a series of 'distant' places that would involve them being driven or taken to predominantly 'adult supervised' activities such as organized sports.

In contrast, metropolitan children would often draw their maps more as a schematic collection of activities that they took part in.

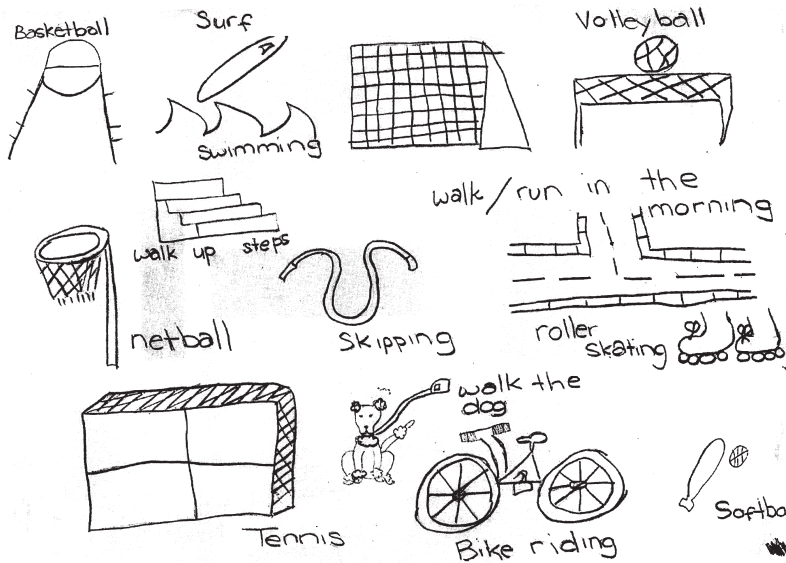


FIGURE 5. Metropolitan child's map of activities

Significantly perhaps, no child described, mapped or photographed the kind of archetypal 'private' or 'secret' child's place such as a 'den' or 'cubby house' (Kjørholt, 2003; Kylin, 2003).

The multiple methods used in this study had practical value, in helping children to provide 'data' that was deemed authentic, important and credible by a range of government decision makers, service planners and providers and other influential adults. In particular, advertising agencies recognized the value of this qualitative research data and became advocates for the importance of research grounded in children's everyday worlds when negotiating the development of a television campaign commissioned by the South Australian government to promote activity among children. In discussions between the account director of the public relations company and author Colin MacDougall, the director commented that public relations companies prefer to use research but that this is rarely funded or provided by clients who may assume that the company knows, or can quickly determine the latest evidence or community views. Specifically, the manager noted that the research was valuable for them in designing their campaign because 'It provided concise insights about where kids are at', because 'the authors provided their interpretations as well as direct data' and because 'the authors are senior and were directly involved in the conduct and analysis of the research'. (Personal communication with Account Manager, 13 August 2003).

The creator of the advertisements was similarly positive that research highlighting children's perspectives was invaluable in helping design materials and messages that would 'make sense' to children. The research was

felt to be the most useful of all of the briefing papers given to the agency (Personal communication with Creative Director, 20 August 2003). School children who were not involved in the research featured in the development and filming of the campaign. The campaign could not use the children's images directly from the study because ethics committee approval did not extend to using the children's data in this way. Instead, the campaign incorporated the study's child-generated ideas which showed that 'play' was a far more energizing and engaging concept for children than was the adult-favoured 'physical activity'. This led directly to the development of specific slogans and campaign themes (see <http://www.beactive.com.au>).

PITFALLS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Research with children demands flexibility and creativity on the part of both the researchers and their 'data collection' approaches. Such flexibility is, we contend, not methodologically sloppy, but an important element of a research relationship with children. We had to modify and adapt elements of the study as it progressed in the light of the children's responses. This required experienced researchers who understood research, schools and children. Such a fieldwork involvement with participant children should be the clear responsibility of an experienced chief investigator(s) and is not an element of a study that can be delegated to a relatively inexperienced research assistant with only 'hands off' supervision.

Although the focus groups did work well in the school setting, we needed to work with and around school-based norms. Adults in the schools would sometimes expect children to model norms of classroom behaviour such as putting a hand up for permission to speak, sitting still, having one person speaking at a time and speaking only when asked a question. We do not disparage these norms as they may well have a place in a busy classroom, but we did find that the focus groups were more interactive and productive when held in less formal school spaces. It was also beneficial, as Morgan et al. (2002) found, to have both a moderator/facilitator and a non-participant note-taker/recorder present as taping these groups for transcription would have proved impossible. These notes and observations of the dynamics and interactions within the group were important contributions to subsequent data analysis.

During data analysis and interpretation we also found that a particularly useful strategy was to have one of the chief investigators take the role of devil's advocate and qualitative-research skeptic who would openly challenge emerging lines of thought and potential findings with tough questions such as: 'So what?', 'Where's the evidence for that?', 'What do you mean by 'interesting?', 'What else could this mean?' and 'How exactly do these ideas relate?'. We found this to be a valuable guard against any interpretive 'premature closure' (Beck, 2003).

Several lessons were learned from this study that would influence our methodological decisions in future studies. While the children responded well to being asked to photograph their immediate environments related to their daily activities and while they did add comments to some of their photographs, we missed the opportunity to ensure that time and opportunity were created to allow the children to talk about their photographs and thus extend the discussion about the cultural, social and geographic context of their everyday activities (Morrow, 2001; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Young and Barrett, 2001). As such, we have Photovoice without the voice which is a limitation of the study. The problem remains that having children take photographs and then having only adults 'interpret' (or possibly misinterpret) them is potentially an adultist approach to research on children that we sought to avoid. While a picture may indeed be worth a thousand words, we have no doubt that the children's thousand words would have enhanced this aspect of the study. We are currently exploring other approaches to the use and interpretation of photographs that may be useful in understanding this photographic element of the study (Clark and Zimmer, 2001; Horowitz et al., 2003; Sharples et al., 2003).

Due primarily to budget constraints, our initial plan was to select a sub-sample of the focus-group-participant children with both high and low levels of physical activity to have disposable cameras. However, children clamoured for cameras and were disappointed when they were not selected. Our response was to rearrange the budget and buy more, less expensive cameras to increase the numbers of children able to take part. By doing this, we were able to give cameras to children who exemplified the range of characteristics in each focus group. In future studies, we would budget for every child to have a camera to avoid disappointment and the need to construct selection criteria that made no sense to a focus group of children. This is a small price to pay for 'research fairness'.

The 'one off' interview or contact with a particular child or group is valuable but as a 'snapshot' it can be frustratingly limited. There were several points in the study and in the analysis when it would have been beneficial to be able to return to the field to ask the children for further details, clarification or other examples. The other possibility offered by a more longitudinal approach would of course be the possibility of tracking changes in the children's experiences, thus extending our appreciation of childhood's temporality by 'linking time and texture in the study of childhood' (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003: 196), and to extend the sample to include children from remote and rural areas including indigenous communities. These are now the foci of a current grant funding application.

Conclusion

As researchers we would do our craft a disservice by glossing over the challenges involved in moving from the 'adultist' orientation that produces research 'on' children, to a more participatory and child-sensitive research 'with' children. Nor is it helpful to report a sanitized account of research that comprises only successful stages on the open highway from question to recommendations. Such a conceptual and methodological shift is not achieved simply by adopting or adapting a particular methodology or data collection technique to 'fit' children but by critically questioning and reflecting on all aspects of the research process from the generation of questions to the dissemination of findings and by trying to learn as much from our shortcomings as from our successes. As Hendrick (2000: 55) argues, 'Only when the mentality of adultism has been overcome will it be possible to hear a more authentic and, probably, unsettling set of voices'.

We have shared our experiences of using a variety of qualitative approaches in order to explore children's perceptions of physical activity, play and their related social and physical environments. We contend that using a variety of research strategies to interest and engage children in the study was both philosophically appropriate and pragmatically valuable. These strategies respected children's agency as social actors and active participants in the creation of their own worlds of meaning. The various approaches complemented rather than duplicated and enabled the expression of different aspects of the children's experiences. The multiple approaches were also successful in depicting the children's worlds in ways that influential adults also found to be credible and valuable.

Our research in this area is a work in progress both in relation to the substantive study area and to our own development as researchers responding to Oakley's challenge to our understanding of expertise in research with children:

It would seem that experts on children are precisely that – in other words, advocates of research *on* children, rather than defenders of children's interests in taking part in research which is *for* them. The best way to defend the development of children's studies for children is to enrol them fully in the research process. (Oakley, 1994: 26)

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