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The implementation of participatory approaches in interviews involving adolescents

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Abstract

Research highlights the importance of capturing children's experiences and reflects on how to effectively access it; adolescents are often underrepresented in this literature. In reality conducting interviews with them represents a challenge, either for their participation, or their confidence when reporting their experience to researchers. How can researchers effectively engage with adolescents in order for them to feel confident in interview situations?

This question is explored within the context of two different studies in which adolescents were asked to report experiences in relation to their schooling. In the first study, adolescents were requested to draw pictures that supported the interview. In the second study, three conditions (cameraman, interview to the double, cards drawing) introduced in video interviews created an enjoyable atmosphere.

Within both studies many signs of confidence from students were observed when the supportive approaches were implemented in the interview situations. The studies identify ways where participatory approaches can be implemented positively in order to gain a deeper understanding of adolescents' school related experiences.

Aims

A wide range of research emphasizes the importance of capturing children's experiences, and recommends enabling them to overcome the power asymmetry with the researcher to effectively facilitate their involvement (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). Adolescents represent a large group that is often underrepresented in the literature and gathering qualitative data through interviews with them can present several challenge for researchers (Bassett, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic & Chapman, 2008). It can be difficult to recruit them for participation in qualitative research for they may not feel confident in the interview situations or free to discuss experiences which may appear to conflict with adult (or teacher) expectations.

The relationship that is constructed between the researcher and the young persons will affect their feelings of confidence, and therefore their participation and engagement.

How can researchers effectively engage with adolescents in order for them to feel confident in interview situations, thereby maximizing their participation?

This question was explored within the context of two different studies both involving adolescents. The first was in New Zealand and the second took place in France.

Methodology

The purpose of the interviews in both studies was to gather information about adolescent's perspectives on their experiences related to schooling.

In the first study ten adolescents aged between 11 and 12 years old were participants as part of a larger study involving their parents. Their perception of their parents' role in their learning was gathered in the context of two semi-structured interviews. Prior to their interviews, they were requested to draw pictures which represented three specific areas: how they felt their parents showed value for their education, expressed their expectations and activities that they engaged with at home related to learning. They could add words to the drawings if they chose to. Harcourt, Perry and Waller (2011) suggest that images can be used during discussions between adolescents and researchers as they can be useful "icebreakers" and can help to break down the power dynamic. The drawings were used as a way for the young people to express their thoughts on the focus for the interview and served as discussion points.

The second study involved nine adolescents aged between 11 and 15 years. They were video interviewed; the general theme of these interviews was to capture their school experience. For six of them, we introduced three particular interview conditions: first, they came to the interview situation in pairs. One served as a cameraman and the other was the interviewee, and the researcher acted as interviewer. Second, we used "interview to the double" technique (Gherardi, 2012) in which the researcher initiates the interview by the statement: "I'm your double, and tomorrow I will go to school for you. So you have to instruct me about everything you do". We also asked the students to speak about emblematic personal objects of their school experience (academic planner, school bag). Third, we initiated the interview situations in the form of a chance card drawing, and a "joker" card was laid on the table indicating the students could refuse to answer a question if they chose to.

Findings

Within both studies several signs of confidence from students were observed when the supportive approaches were implemented. In the first study, the drawings provided the foundation for the interview. The young people had time to draw and reflect on what they wanted to share, prior to going into the interview. Students reported that this was helpful as it gave them time to prepare and reflect on that they wanted to talk about. Additionally, a key sign of confidence in this study was the length of the interviews; the more detail included in their picture the more they chose to talk about. In the second study, students were at first not very keen to participate in the interview, it was difficult to engage with them. Once the three conditions were

introduced for a pair of students, a lot of others asked to participate. During the interviews, involvement was with both the researcher and their peer who was behind the camera, thereby making the whole process highly engaging. Interview to the double and card drawing seemed to be fun; they served as a motivator to involvement and created a relaxed atmosphere. Students were observed talking easily about what took place in their regular school day and also those activities that were habitually hidden from adults; for example fights and role playing during classes.

Theoretical and educational significance

Researchers who are interested in investigating the perspectives of children have to be creative and flexible in their methods (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005). The results of our studies highlighted the importance of creating environments where adolescents feel confident with the researcher. By equipping the adolescents with support materials, peer support and allowing them partial control over the research environment, the studies indicated how a participatory approach facilitated collaboration and led to high levels of participation.

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