

CHILD-CENTERED METHODS, PROCESSES, AND DEVELOPMENTS IN CHILDHOOD STUDIES

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ABSTRACT. Along with the participatory research and rights-based approach, the changing position of the child in the research process leads to developing and analyzing new methods and data collection techniques. As the researchers recognize the child as an active agent of his/her own life, the possibilities of participation in the research become part of researches. Instead of the traditional research methods (such as questionnaires and observation), the creative methods have come into force in many academic fields when children are in research. This article examines the changes in the research methods with children and underlines further needs to scrutinize the entire research process with children, including the role of the researchers.

Keywords: *participation, child-centered methods, research methods, creative methods, childhood research*

INTRODUCTION

With the consideration of the child as an 'active' research subject, researchers deploy different child-centered research methods to understand the immediate environment, perception, and preferences of children. Despite taking more time and resources compared to traditional methods, these new methods provide us with a variety of perspectives to understand children's environments and experiences.

This article presents a review of the main child-centered methods. It discusses the advantages and disadvantages of these methods in child studies. The following section details the historical context of childhood studies with the acceptance of the child as a subject as a paradigm shift. Then the paper talks about various creative methods with a search for participatory research processes or the research with children. The final section underlines the importance of the role of the researcher in child-focused methods.



Fig. 1. *Children in creative activities (photographs by G.Saracer)*

Historical Context of Childhood Studies

The inclusion and recognition of children as participants in the research has recently taken place [10]. During the early 90s, a new approach appeared in childhood studies as participatory methods [27, 40]. This was an attempt to include users with participation in the design and research process where children were mostly ignored before [18]. To understand the exclusion of children from the research process and also from social life, we should take a glance at how children are defined.

The definition of childhood includes lots of dichotomies. While being autonomous or being in need of protection is one-fold of the discussion, its reflection on urban planning and design is about whether perceiving the child as a citizen or future citizen [38]. Representation of childhood and children by design practices as a homogenous group misses the fact that identities are not fixed [6, 39].

Until the paradigm shift occurred in childhood studies, children were seen as incompetent, vulnerable, and not adequate to express themselves. While the use of children as a research object was ethically problematic, the approach to childhood from developmental psychology examined childhood as detached from its cultural and environmental context. Most studies with children continue the research with traditional research methods such as questionnaires and surveys with parents to understand the daily life of children, rather than handing the microphone to children, due to ethical concerns and perceiving children as inadequate. Consideration of children as objects, not subjects of research, creates the term “research on children not with them” [26]. With the postmodern and feminist theories, the position of the children involved in the research changed as they were seen as knowing and competent agents about their own lives and experiences, rather than being seen as a passive respondent from which information was extracted. [15, 20].

The exclusion of children from research and design practice leads to a reduction in children's usage of public spaces and creates dead and ghost places. Meanwhile,

childhood geographers come into the scene to try to involve children's ideas, desires and needs into the design process to create child-friendly environments [14]. The approach to understand children's environment and perceptions from their multiple voices brought a methodological quest for the democratic inclusion of children in urban life [2]. According to Karsten & Vliet [31], planners did not pay enough attention to understand the significance of local scales in children's daily routine. Designing child-friendly neighborhoods and communities are fundamental to create vital and livable places for all [33]. To achieve this, everyone's voice in the community should be heard.

In 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) declared that children have a right as a citizen to participate in processes which affect their lives [43]. In the Habitat II Conference in İstanbul, UNICEF introduced the Child-Friendly City concept to design more livable and democratic cities [32]. Participation of children in decision makings was one of the steps to create a child-friendly environment. In Turkey, UNICEF and Turkish Republic collaborated for a Child-Friendly City project that is framed in the National Action Plan [21]. All attempts were a call to empower children and give them a voice. Elshater [12] argued that to design more responsive and child-friendly cities, designers and policymakers should put children's ideas on the agenda. Presupposing the Convention on the Rights of the Child will be brought into force, the approach for child-friendly city assures children's right to make decisions and participate in the process affecting their lives [44]. As Gökmen and Taşçı [21] stated, child-friendly city can come true with the collaboration of all stakeholders in the community.

From Participatory to Child-Centered Research

Participation has popularity in social studies. Most of the literature promotes usage of participatory techniques. But how it is understood and applied should be carefully examined. Hart [23] states the steps of participation about how to involve children in research from 'tokenism' to 'children as researchers.' The application of theory and method gives different answers. Ergler [15] shows in his 'water and play' study that the positions of children in the research are slippery, changeable, and constantly jumping between steps. Therefore, it is necessary to understand participation as a process that enables transition between steps rather than a linear process. Also, if children had a chance for taking an active role in research, the assumption that they would want it might be misleading and ignore the possibility that the children might not want to be involved in every stage. According to Gallacher and Gallagher [19], understanding participation as a strict method with a clear end and start point can cause us not to grasp what children are actually telling something by not responding or doing anything. Thus, instead of seeing the participant methods as an answer, we need to investigate its advantages and disadvantages, flexibility, and forms of inclusion carefully.

Veale [46] describes creative methods as an innovative and artistic procedure in which participants have an imaginative and creative tool to express their thoughts and feelings. Creative methods include many activities such as map drawing, sentence completion, imaginary charts, photographing, role-playing, and keeping diaries. With the inclusion of children in the research as subjects, different research methods are developed to make the research process more playful. The enrichment of research methods with a focus on children enables us to deeply understand the daily life experiences and perspectives of children.

Child-focused research methods are developed according to children's capabilities. Ennew and Boyden [13] state children have limited verbal skills and different ways of

using it. Also, their distraction on a topic is relatively shorter. Developmental arguments are not enough to understand the children's capabilities which are socially and culturally different. Using multiple qualitative methods enable us to control and deepen data, whereas a single method is no longer enough to explain the causal mechanism of daily experiences of children [24]. Therefore, the combination of different data collection techniques allows us to reach more detailed data and a deeper understanding of what children experienced.

Childhood studies have developed in many areas, aimed at understanding and expressing children's perspectives and their capacities. With the understanding that childhood is multiple and children cannot be handled as a homogeneous group, researcher find that each method cannot suit everyone. A bunch of a combination of techniques enables everyone to participate more democratically. Participation as a child-centered approach includes interaction and continual debates between all individuals involved [42]. This created space for research has the potential of power imbalance as a researcher has a familiar tool with adultist attitude while children are only supposed to jump in.



Fig. 2. *Children in creative activities*

Recently, new approaches have begun to emerge to make children's involvement in the research more playful and more familiar. Coen et al. [9] investigated what potential poetic techniques offer to understand children's spatial experiences. He says that during his work, the game allows for new possibilities and ways of thinking and that the process continues in a way that feels good for researchers and participants. However, understanding children only in visual and playful methods run counter to our child-centered approach. Children's drawings create visual material, making it easier for us to understand children's experiences, while conversations with children enable us to access deeper information. The use of more playful methods creates a warmer atmosphere while making the research environment a fun and peaceful place.

Hyvönen et al. [30] uses a child-centered approach in two case studies to examine children's efficacious agency such as video observation, photography, and stimulated recall interviews. The research shows that different methods allow many interactions to occur between participants and researchers provide deeper knowledge about children's agency. In the photography session, they use the detective role to make research more exciting and playful for kids, at the same time giving them a better understanding of what they need to photograph. In one case, they use certain cards to define emotions to facilitate semi-structured interviews in which children contribute easily. At every stage of the research, photos and videos are used to focus on context and to be on the same page with the participants.

Methods at Child-Centered Research

Child-centered research uses various methods that has advantages and disadvantages. It is important to decide which one suits the best to the research context.

Focus Group is a technique used in many different fields for a long time. As it enables the researcher to use a range of techniques, it can be a good fit for many types of research, but not all. Basch [4] suggests that the focus group reduces pressure on individuals and gives time to think about them, according to one-on-one interviews. At the same time, it allows us to observe interpersonal interaction and encounter. The dialogues developed between people enable a consensus to create an environment suitable for analysis and ranking of the data produced. In focus group interviews that create a safe space for children with their peers, the power relationship between the adult researcher and the child participant is also balanced with the peer relationships in the group [25]. In their study with primary school-aged children, Hill [26] focuses on conducting a focus group discussion and face to face interviews with children. It is seen that group speech is difficult on deeper and sensitive issues and more introverted children give more responses in one-on-one conversations. Many factors in the selection of focus group sampling (such as familiarity among participants, gender, race and age range) affect the results. Also differences within the group can lead to problems and stress among the participants [26, 45].



Fig. 3. *Children in group activity*

Many researchers use photographs that have gained popularity as a creative method with children [3, 35]. While the photography technique provides a tool to express the opinions and needs of the participants, it also enables the researcher to obtain visible data [34, 37]. While using this data collection technique, a short meeting is held on children to get used to the device and what to expect [17, 30, 37]. But there are some points that should be taken into consideration when taking photographs. It is seen that the presence of the adult pushes children to take photos that meet the expectations culturally and socially, in the style that more researchers would like [10, 36].

By creating a tangible data between the researcher and the participant, photography technique is often used in conjunction with the interview technique to understand what is meant by a photograph [29]. Photography provides benefits such as keeping the focus on the subject, using it with interview allows us to get richer data and a better understanding of what pictures actually represent. Since the search for different methods for children is made because the verbal skills of children are not sufficiently developed, creative tools such as cameras enable them to express themselves by preventing the obstructions that may occur during the interview and by providing other visual tools [30, 46].

Hume [29] uses the map drawing and photograph mapping technique to investigate the relationship between their perspectives and physical activity in children's home and neighborhood environment. During the research, they conduct one-week lessons in which dialogues are developed on concepts such as neighborhood and home, and information is given about the map. In this research, the combination of quantitative qualitative methods shows that, besides visual data, informal and formal dialogues provide us to reach more holistic results about children's local environment. Sahimi and Said's [37] research to understand the things that children love and dislike around the school uses the photography technique by making a peer pair due to the young age of the children (4-5 years old).

Drawing, a technique that children are familiar with at school, allows us to analyze the cognitive map of children on certain concepts [7, 29]. Although drawing is a boring technique for young adults, it is seen as a fun creative method for children of primary school age. Punch [36] uses this technique in his study with other qualitative methods as a more comfortable form of expression because the child has more control over the image presented. However, although drawing is a good warm-up or icebreaker, like photography, it has the possibility that children draw what the adult wants or comes easy. Therefore, like other visual techniques, we can reach a more complete understanding when it is used together with the interview [17].

Keeping diary enables us to understand the routines and activities of children's lives that vary according to gender, age, and family structure [36]. Besides, trip diaries are used to understand the children's mobility in time and space schedules [8]. However, since the diaries are a task-based method, it has to be completed at school or at home, which can affect results with peer pressure or risk of being seen by their parents [17].



Fig. 4. Children in group activity

What is left out there after research?

Most of the studies suggest that conducting research together with multiple methods support the accuracy of the information obtained with data collection techniques. However, not many of them point out what the participants feel after the research [22]. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the participants benefit and feel good from this process while they share the information with researchers [19].

Hardfield-Hill & Horrton [22] investigated participant's emotional states during the research activities with the children between the ages of 9 -16. They used many methods, such as participant observation, guided walks, semi-structured interviews and GPS activities. The results of the research contain many concerns and excitement difficult to understand throughout the research. For example, the research reveals that the GPS device causes disillusionment and anxiety for some children because it is foreign to them and creates problems with its use. Using different tools makes children sometimes excited or happy, while taking responsibility for something they are not familiar with can cause them to find themselves in an anxious situation. Beazley [5] also points overlooked parts of participation can cause empowering children who can feel pressure to be involved in an unprepared situation. In this sense, ethnographic researches are important to understand the results of the techniques used and also the involvement of the participants [1].



Fig. 5. *Children in creative activities*

Researcher's Impact on Data

The researches with child-centered methods emphasize the role of the researcher as one of the most important roles [30]. The researcher's attitude towards children affects the analysis and the production of the data from the beginning [36, 41]. None of the participatory research methods and techniques enable us to produce different data unless the researcher leaves an adult attitude and be reflexive about the entire process [30].

Research is a messy and awkward process in which data generated [11, 28]. Therefore, the researcher's stance in the research setting has a considerable importance to keep power balance with participants. Researchers should keep in mind that research is a reciprocal process of learning between researchers and participants [16]. Therefore, the position of the researcher must be constantly questioned to carry out the research on a more collective basis. It is necessary to establish communication at every stage of the research.

Another role of the researcher is to take a facilitating role in group discussions and keep the subject within the frame rather than to determine the direction of the discussion and to ensure everyone's voice can be heard [46]. Also, the researcher should state that there are no right or wrong answers and encourage children not to take an attitude such as giving the researcher's desired answer [25, 36].

Spending time with children in the research and being side by side in many times and places provide a connection between the researcher and the participants. It enables the researcher to get familiar with the words used by children, can facilitate analysis of verbal descriptions. To establish a rapport with children and not to be understood as an authority figure like a parent or teacher, the researcher should express his/her position in a clear and understandable language to children [25]. If the content of the research is not clearly explained, children can feel lost or get bored. So the researcher should remember that children too make an emotional effort for the research and they should get something in turn.

CONCLUSION

Child-centered research methods are increasingly being used in many areas of child geography and social sciences. It is clear that child-centered methods should be used together as a rights-based approach to understand the perception and experience of the child's environment and the polyphony of children. Child-centered methods enable us to understand the complexity of social life, rather than the accuracy of the information obtained. Even though we have different tools in research with children, the researcher's attitude can cause misleading or false information as in adults. As long as the researcher does not get rid of the adult role and express the purpose of the research and his/her position, the problems might continue. It is necessary to carefully examine which method to use according to the subject of the research.

The power between the researcher and the child is balanced with the research tools that children are familiar with and the use of verbal and visual techniques together. The use of many different methods together allows us to understand children's experiences and preferences, but mixing methods result in serious time and material burden. For this reason, the methods to be used must be chosen economically in terms of time and money to meet research content. Technological and cultural developments also affect the form of research. For this reason, the tools that make the research more enjoyable follow the technological possibilities of the period.

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